

Mari Hirata with her works, including *The Beauty and the Pain* (on wall), *Sweet Reflections* (on plinth), *Wildflower and Bloomers* (on easel and floor), all 2011.

Shoe GAZER

Young Gold Coast photographer, sculptor and installation artist Mari Hirata is mad about high heels, discovers *SUSIE BURGE*

When Mari Hirata was an art student, she worked part-time as an interpreter for a wedding company that catered for Japanese couples who came to Queensland's Gold Coast for their dream wedding. "One day they were replacing all these white shoes, shoes that had been worn by hundreds of Japanese brides. I asked if I could have them. It started from there ..."

"It" turned into an artistic obsession. The simple high-heeled pump is now the central component of Hirata's practice. During the past few years the shoe has morphed from an object laden with subjective cultural symbolism ("empty shoes are like the remnants of a person," says Hirata) to a pure form that, depending on the medium, alludes to different worlds — from natural history to genres of sculpture.

"I'm interested in multiples of the same object," she explains. In the very first works, she took the shoes down to the beach and took some photos. "I was trying to poke fun at the whole wedding industry — what trouble we go to for just one moment." Then she started to place the shoes around the house. She pinned them up on the Hills Hoist, an ironic nod to the 1950s housewife (and also bringing to mind Lin Onus's wonderful *Fruit Bats* from 1991). From there she did a series of colour

photographs based on her family, where shoes symbolised different generations.

In the more recent photograms the shoes are something else entirely. For these, Hirata uses tiny ornamental clear plastic heels. The light bounces and fractures off the angles, resulting in an X-ray effect and beautiful hairline markings of light that seem like delicate pencil or ink. The shoes become flocks of birds, skeletons, blossoms.

Hirata was born in Japan to a Sri Lankan/Dutch mother and Japanese father. The family emigrated to Australia when she was 10. She grew up on the Gold Coast, gaining a Bachelor of Visual Arts in Fine Arts and a master's in Visual Arts at Queensland College of Art at Griffith University. She's had three solo shows to date and has been included in numerous group exhibitions.

In 2011 she's pushing her practice further as part of the JUMP mentoring program ("It's for emerging artists under 30 — I just squeezed in"). Her mentor is edgy Brisbane-based sculptor Alasdair Macintyre, one of her heroes. With him, she's specifically focusing on sculpture and plastics, learning new techniques.

Hirata's work has been compared to photographer Olive Cotton's famous *Teacup Ballet* — an observation that seems apt. In this digital age, she still gets into the darkroom and still uses film for her large colour photographs.

The Beauty and the Pain #4, 2011.



Her photograms are one-offs. After arranging the shoes in particular intricate patterns, she marks up the paper and then recreates the design in the dim red light of the darkroom. She uses a hand torch to achieve different exposure effects. Then, instead of immersing the whole print, she'll paint and spray on developer fluid to achieve further artisanal effects. Everything takes an old-fashioned amount of time. And yes, she still has those first pairs of white heeled shoes.

Mari Hirata is represented by Lorraine Pilgrim and Retrospect Galleries. Her solo exhibition *Wild Soles* is at Retrospect Galleries on the Gold Coast, October 14-27, <http://qld.retrospectgalleries.com>.