



Hu Xiaoyuan, *Grass Thorn IV*, 2017, wood, ink, raw silk, silk thread, nails, marble, steel, 40 1/8 x 21 5/8 x 12 1/2".

## Hu Xiaoyuan

BEIJING COMMUNE

This exhibition was the second installment of Hu Xiaoyuan's exhibition trilogy. Much like the name of the trilogy's first chapter, "Ant Bone," this show's title, "Grass Thorn," reminds one of an Emily Dickinson poem with its awkward and elusive semantics. The works of art are enigmatic cues to investigate the potential meanings of these words. What can the viewer draw from them?

The gallery opened up to a constellation of works from the series "Momentary Place," 2015–17, and "Grass Thorn," 2016–17. The former includes five structures of reclaimed and rusted metallic sticks welded into a flimsy tower, a pyramid, and tents. On top of each work, the artist draped pieces of raw silk that she exposed to the elements for more than a

year, as if these canopy-like ensembles were what one would stumble on in a natural environment. The original Chinese title of “Momentary Place,” *Chà-yu*, refers to an encounter that frames an otherwise ongoing time at a place: *Chà*, a translation from the Sanskrit *ksana*, is a measurement for an imperceptibly small amount of time, and *yu* conveys a place, a site, or a field.

If “Momentary Place” set up the scene, then “Grass Thorn” presented its actors. These found pieces of wood (appearing as large knots and studs, a hollow tree trunk, and everyday objects such as a spatula and a racket) are paired with metal or marble structures that either structurally support or completely offset them. The works range from a piece of trunk in the shape of a human hip standing congruently on a welded wire pedestal (*Grass Thorn IV*, 2017), to a larger piece of wood weighing down a simplified version of Marcel Duchamp’s bottle rack (*Grass Thorn I*, 2016), to two wooden disks stacked together on a slanted bench (*Grass Thorn V*, 2017). As much as these uncanny installation vignettes are at odds with one another, each piece somehow strikes a balance and defies gravity.

Hu is not simply restaging found moments in the gallery setting, even though the incorporation of everyday objects suggests real life; she offers her viewers subtle perceptive experiences. On all of the wooden surfaces, she continues to employ a laborious process she first invented in 2008. The artist traces the grain pattern of the wood onto raw silk and reattaches the fabric to the surface once the wood has been painted over. The materials in Hu Xiaoyuan’s visual constructs are not only registers for marking time but also represent its duration.

Crafted in the same fashion, two works from the “Wood” series, 2008–, were hung at each end of the gallery. One could mistake the subtle color variations of *Wood/Rift No. 10* and *Wood/Purlin No. 6*, both 2017, for Agnes Martin paintings, an understandable association since both artists sublimated their personal experience into abstract forms. In Hu Xiaoyuan’s case, however, the invented visual system, juxtaposing the fragile with the sturdy and the ephemeral with the eternal, challenges the integrity of our observation. It exposes the gap between subjective experience and the objective world, and the viewer is free to discover his or her own resonance with the metaphysical.

—Fiona He

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