Performance art

The ethereal simplicity of the tree portraits created by South Korean artist Myoung Ho Lee belies the feats of engineering needed for their construction

WORDS ALYS HURN

MYOUNG HO LEE, COURTESY YOSSI MILO GALLERY, NEW YORK

Left Before photographing each tree, Myoung Ho observes it over the course of a year to decide on the best time to take his photograph. This portrait, *Tree #3*, 2006, captures the stark beauty of winter near Seoul, South Korea. **Top** The empty expanse of the Mongolian landscape behind *Tree... #2*, 2011 emphasises its shape and autumn hues. **Above left** In *Tree #9*, 2006, the blank canvas serves to foreground the beauty of the foliage and isolate it from its ordinary surroundings. **Above right** Balloons, echoing the rounded branches of the *Podocarpus macrophyllus*, add a playfully surreal touch to *Tree #2*, 2006.

South Korean artist Myoung Ho Lee repeatedly asks himself the question, 'what is art?' It is the inspiration for all his work and it was the starting point for the atmospheric *Tree* series he started back in 2006. "I like walking slowly," he explains. "Then I start to absorb my surroundings as if I am a sponge. As an artist, it is the time when the question 'what is art?' becomes an empty white canvas."

Myoung Ho, who captured trees in South Korea for his first series, *Tree* and subsequently all over the world for his second, titled *Tree…* uses the white canvas as an active component in all his portraits. He says, "Why not take the blank canvas out [of the studio] and let nature paint on it? Instead of drawing on canvas, the concept here is to engage the canvas into the real subject." By taking the canvas 'out' and using it as a backdrop to his photographs, Myoung Ho draws attention to the existing, natural forms of art that, in our busy day-to-day lives, are easy to pass by. Trees are his medium of choice because they are so embedded in our everyday environment and by capturing them in this unique way he can bring them to the fore. "There are so many things that exist in this world, each with its own meaning, and I believe there isn't anything more important or less important," he explains. "What I do is find the values of those existences and show them to people."

Setting up the portraits is a complex process. Cranes and a large-scale crew are needed to install each bespoke canvas, which is custom made to suit the size of the tree, but are generally in the region of 10 x 20m. The smallest breeze can cause the canvas to ripple so iron rods are inserted at the top and the bottom of the sheet and between eight and 12 crew members hold the ropes attached to the canvas to help keep it in place. A minimum amount of retouching is needed post-shot to remove the supportive materials from the final image.

Masking the work that goes on behind the scenes brings these seemingly simple portraits close to the boundary of what is real and what isn't. In doing so, Myoung Ho prompts opinion and interpretation, and for him that is the most important part of the artistic process. "I think an artist is an examiner who makes a question without an answer," he says. "Whatever my viewers feel and how they respond, I am fully ready to accept." □

• Myoung Ho Lee's prints are available to buy from the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York. Prices start at $2,000 for a 12 x 10cm print. For more information visit yossimilo.com
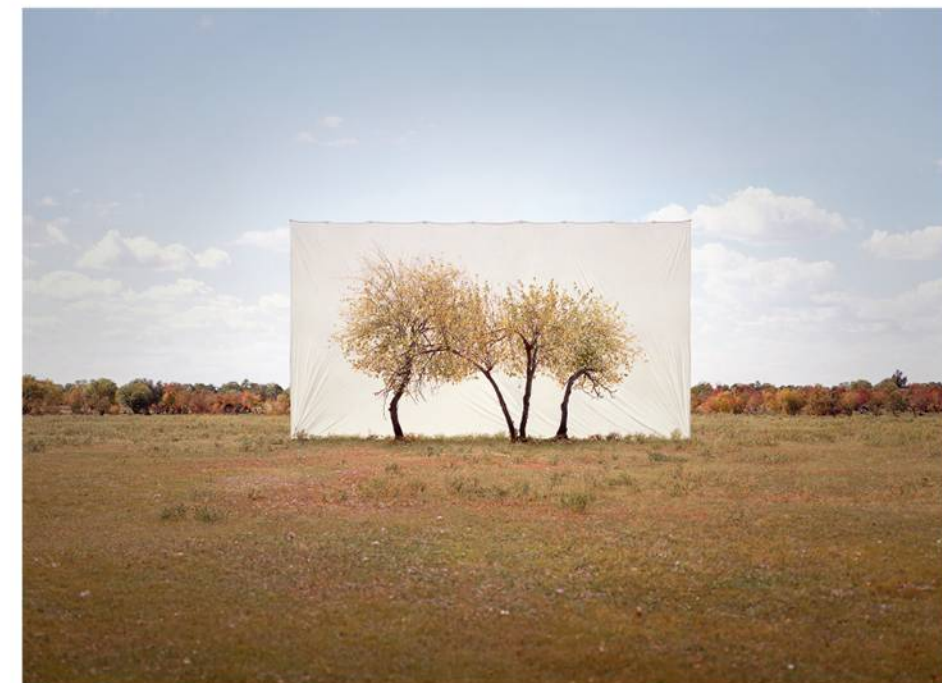
Top In a selection of portraits for his second series, *Tree…*, Myoung Ho has exploited Mongolia's barren landscape to intensify the effect of framing his subjects. In this portrait, *Tree… #3*, 2012, he has cleverly avoided showing any crushed or flattened grass to mask all traces of human intervention. **Above left** The Siberian larch in *Tree… #6*, 2013 dominates the empty scape in which it sits; the white canvas against the grey sky makes the tree appear majestic in its isolation. **Above right** Ripples in the canvas behind the Korean cherry in *Tree… #4*, 2013 illustrate the complexity involved in setting up Myoung Ho's tree portraits.