



PHOTO COURTESY SHINJI TURNER-YAMAMOTO

Shinji Turner-Yamamoto sits near his “Hanging Garden” installation inside Holy Cross Church.

Trees as Testament

Shows at CAC and Holy Cross Church explore nature’s impermanence

▶ REVIEW BY TAMERA LENZ MUEENTE

When Shinji Turner-Yamamoto arrived in Cincinnati, he discovered the ideal place for his current installation, “Hanging Garden.” During a visit to gallerist Mary Baskett’s home, he spotted a photograph of a decaying church interior. Baskett explained it was Holy Cross Church, which had been deconsecrated in



the 1970s but still stands at the top of Mount Adams. When he stepped inside the soaring 19th-century Renaissance Revival building, he had a vision.

“I saw a young, living tree floating in the middle of the chapel,” says the Japanese-born artist. “Although the church was being used for storage and

things were lying around everywhere, I could see its beauty was still there.”

Two years later, Turner-Yamamoto has realized his vision. What was a mind-boggling technical feat — a live tree supported by a dead one, their roots intertwined like conjoined twins — appears effortless and magical, a bit like a miracle. How does a tree, precariously suspended in the air, remain green and vital? Like

the best poems, “Hanging Garden” makes us see something we take for granted in a new way.

Situated within the space of a former church, it’s hard not to draw parallels to Christian religious iconography. The birch tree reaching

towards the sky brings to mind ascension paintings in which the Virgin Mary is lifted to Heaven by angels. The tree, however, is held aloft by a dead birch, its paper-white bark still gleaming. The two trees become a sort of altarpiece before which viewers can contemplate life, death and regeneration, their entwined roots a sermon that life and death are necessarily tied together. That being said, the work bridges faiths and touches on a more inclusive spirituality accessible in both art and nature.

This installation is only on display until Oct. 17 for hours and details). But, fortunately, Turner-Yamamoto continues to explore issues of rebirth and renewal with his concurrent exhibition, *Disappearances*, at downtown’s Contemporary Arts Center. And it is up through Jan. 30.

While surveying the Holy Cross location, Turner-Yamamoto became fascinated with the debris that had

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HANGING GARDEN is on view at Holy Cross Church in Mount Adams Saturdays and Sundays through Oct. 17. **DISAPPEARANCES** is up through Jan. 30 at the Contemporary Arts Center.

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fallen from its crumbling walls. He collected several aged plaster chunks that reminded him of “suiseki” — Japanese viewing stones that resemble miniature landscapes — and transformed them into meditative objects partially or completely covered with gold leaf. The brilliant fragments float serenely on the walls of the CAC gallery, creating what Turner-Yamamoto calls a “constellation.” Some resemble small, glittering mountains. Others reveal their history, with layers of stone, plaster and paint visible like geological strata. A few hang in pairs, like sacred tablets. Turner-Yamamoto painstakingly covered some of the fragments with tiny paint chips to create a mosaic-like effect. He incised the gold leaf on others in a tight circular pattern that recalls the halos on religious icons.

In a dimly lit corridor of the CAC exhibition, worn plaster remnants contain bright circles of gold and silver in which I saw my reflection, my own identity drawn into the circle of life created by the artist. This dark corridor opens to a bright space with a ceiling so high it echoes that of a chapel.

Here, Turner-Yamamoto conducted what he considers a “personal ritual.” Inspired by Zen gardens, he built a low mound of marble dust in which he placed five objects. Upon closer inspection, two of the objects are missing, leaving their impression in the fine, white dust.

“I wanted to show traces of things that do not exist anymore,” he says. Even the dust

itself evokes impermanence. “If you grind anything long enough, it becomes white,” the artist says. Dust is the final stage before disappearance.

Meanwhile, the installation at Holy Cross Church is not the first time Turner-Yamamoto (who lives in Cincinnati) has used a decaying building as an art environment. He has created installations in Italy inside a cistern beneath a Genoa church and in an abandoned Florence train station, and has built earthworks inside ruins in Cork, Ireland. He has traveled the world creating the Global Tree Project, which connects people with art and nature.

“I spend a lot of time in my studio behind closed doors, especially when I’m painting,” he says. “This project brings together a community of people, many whom are not familiar with art. Some have said it has changed their lives.”

A special gel and a carefully engineered irrigation system keep the roots moist. After the installation closes, Turner-Yamamoto will replant the tree somewhere near the chapel. Even the dead birch will find new life, as it is delivered to the Art Academy of Cincinnati where students will make works of art from its wood for an exhibition curated by Turner-Yamamoto. “Hanging Garden” doesn’t only comment on the process of regeneration; it functions as a regenerative process itself.

Both “Hanging Garden” and *Disappearances* encourage introspection and wonder. Viewed in tandem, the exhibitions make us consider the profound connections between ourselves, art and the natural world. ©