

500 WORDS

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Anya Gallaccio

07.20.08



that open space within (detail), 2008, dead horse-chestnut tree, rope, and findings, dimensions variable.

Anya Gallaccio often works with and transforms organic materials, and in her new exhibition at London's Camden Arts Centre, titled "that open space within," the artist presents the reconstructed fragments of a large chestnut tree. Here she discusses the undertaking.

WHEN I WAS INVITED to exhibit at Camden, I knew almost immediately I wanted to bring some aspect of the garden inside, to develop a relationship between the gallery's interior and exterior. Eventually, I settled on the idea of finding a tree roughly the height of the building and bringing the middle section into the gallery. I contacted a number of tree surgeons, gave them the gallery's dimensions, and asked them to call me if they were about to take something down that might fit. This introduced an element of chance to the project—having to work with what I was offered—and we ended up settling on a dead chestnut quite close to the deadline. I'm not a tree hugger, but I couldn't justify felling a tree for a temporary project; I wanted one that was already slated to come down.

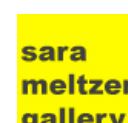
I had aimed to have the tree dissected in uniform eight-foot lengths (roughly human-scale) to emphasize the physical experience of being within the space of a tree and to impose a serial, rational logic. The actual form of the tree disrupts this logic. Despite showing the tree surgeon my detailed drawings for and documentation of *one art*, a similar work that I presented in New York in 2006, the fact of the matter is that he was up on a cherry picker with a huge chain saw, and the cuts were necessarily a bit haphazard. The tree had been dead a long time and was going to become unstable and dangerous. This was both good and bad for me. It reduced the weight of the wood, but it also meant that it was incredibly brittle—there was no flexibility in it. I enjoy that improvisation, the on-the-spot, pragmatic decision-making.

Some of the resulting pieces are fragile; others are hideously heavy and overbearing; the first section weighs one and a half tons. I'm amazed at the strength and engineering of trees, with their huge branches that spread out horizontally and resist the forces of the weather. Obviously, I destroyed the structural integrity of the branches by choosing to cut them, and in putting them back together chose to emphasize the mending or fixing. The bolts extend way beyond the surface of the wood—like pins in a fractured limb—and the ropes hold it in traction within the space. There's no illusion there, and I'm not trying to disguise the artifice of the reconstruction.

The gallery in London is on the second floor of the building, so we took the middle section of the tree—beginning seven meters [twenty-three feet] from the base, the height of the gallery floor from the street outside. The trunk seems to be coming through the floor and fills the space. I hope it is like being up in a tree. (The stump was left at the site as a habitat for bats.) I'm interested in basic, rather banal stuff, like how big trees are and how we relate to them physically. I'm a real townie; I'm a little bit terrified and overwhelmed by nature. My curiosity is more morbid than celebratory.

— As told to Brian Sholis

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