

By Michelle Vachon

Drawing a tree, says Margherita del Balzo, is a like doing a person's portrait.

"Those trees are like individuals. They have a presence, different characters—you could draw trees all your life and you would always see something new," she says.

And the trees in del Balzo's drawings, now on exhibit at the French Cultural Center through Feb 11, indeed have a presence. They raise from their roots, strong and dignified, as ancestral beings at peace with the world.

Drawn on thick handcrafted paper that is as much part of the artworks as the lines sketched with pen and China ink, the trees appear alive with a warmth created by the rugged, nearly sculpted surface of the paper and by the muted tones of red, blue and green, brown and beige.

The artworks either hang on wooden poles as tapestries or behind glass as manuscripts. The sepia-color effect along with the uneven edges of the paper give them an out-of-time aura, as if they were floating on a forever cloud in centuries long past and at the same time part of our era.

Some drawings—usually trees intermingled with stone vestiges—suggest Ta Prohm and Krah Khan temples at Angkor but from angles one cannot quite recall.

In fact, the artworks are also out of space, based on scenes del Balzo may have seen but transformed through her imagination.

"In the creation of an image, here I am, strolling, seeing things, taking photos, drawing some sketches."

"And then, the paper has its say in the matter, sometimes making me do things I had not planned."

For example, she says, it is the paper that dictated mountains over the horizon for Paysage charniere, or scenery at the juncture. In such cases, the work, "is a pleasure from beginning to end because there is nothing to do—one just has to obey the paper."

Del Balzo discovered handcrafted paper when she lived in the Philippines in the early 1990s. She started making her own stock after moving to Burkina Faso in West Africa in 1997.

She started using fiber from kapok trees to make it, and has continued to do so when she relocated to Cambodia in 2004.

The flower seeds of kapok trees, which can be found on the banks of the Tonle Sap river, are surrounded in their pods by a whitish cotton-type of fiber. After kapok leaves have fallen, the pods burst open on the tree, releasing this fiber, which



FROM THE ROOTS UP

Artist Brings Organic Warmth to Ink Drawings of Trees on Handmade Paper

Cambodians often use to fill cushions, del Balzo says.

The technique to make paper is the same with all fibers, she says. First, the fiber is left to rot in water for three to four weeks to gain some body—kapok tree fiber is especially light, del Balzo says.

Once ready, she rinses it and puts

it in a pan with a sodium compound, used for dyeing in the country, to reduce acidity in the paper. Otherwise, ink drawings would fade within years, del Balzo explains.

If she wants color paper, she adds either dye or natural pigments at that stage. Once rinsed to take away dust and residues, the fiber is

grounded into a paste: The finer the paste, the smoother the paper.

For large sheets, Del Balzo spreads the paste onto a mosquito-net type of fabric mounted on a frame, and lets it dry in the sun for at least 24 hours.

To make small sheets, she fills a tub with water and paste, and plunges a sieve into it to capture a coat of paste, which she afterwards spreads on thin fabric for support. After piling sheet upon sheet divided by fabric, she presses water out of them with a wooden board, removes the fabric and lets them dry.

While she usually works with the sheet as it is to create a work, she may add relief to a piece by gluing several sheets of paper on top of each other before starting to sketch.

With the exception of two artworks in the exhibition that were done or started while she still lived in Burkina Faso, the pieces on exhibit at the French Cultural Center were created after she arrived in Cambodia.

But not right after. Del Balzo had spent seven years in a country of savannas and dry grass slowly turning into a desert, all beige and brown, and was now in a land of lush green tropical forest. "I had to adapt, I had to understand all this," she says.

However, Angkor was somewhat like going home. "I was born among old stones since I was born in Rome [with its monuments of the once-powerful Roman empire]. It's a love that I've rediscovered."

Actually when del Balzo hung at the French Cultural Center her piece entitled "Les deux issues," or the two issues—depicting trees in front of a stone corridor and inspired by Banteay Srei temple at Angkor—she says, "I realized that it also looked like the postcards of 'Vanished Rome' that fascinated me so much when I was young."

Born in 1962, del Balzo lived in Rome until she was 15 years old. Then, after about a year in San Francisco, she moved to France. She first studied interior design and architecture, and later switched to drawing at the fine arts school Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.

"Ever since I was very young, I have been drawing—I don't remember ever starting one day," she says.

As for her passion for trees, del Balzo says others also share it. "People come to me and say, 'I have seen a tree like this.' Many people seem to have stories about trees, friendships with trees."

Del Balzo lives in Phnom Penh with her husband Gabriel Pictet and her three children.

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