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cover image: visual diary, an artist book  
previous page: '*cline*' (detail),  
oil and tempera on rice paper





hanna kay

# \*shifting horizons

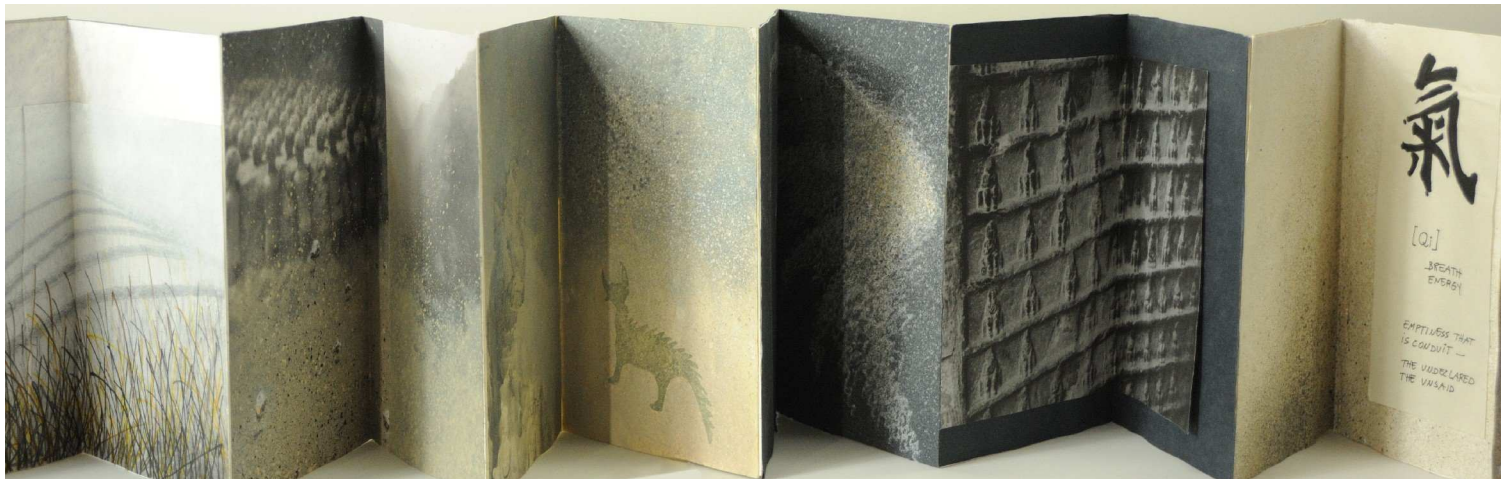






## SHIFTING HORIZONS

In 2012 I had the opportunity to travel to China as part of an artistic exchange. It was a significant trip which added another link to the trajectory of my artistic practice. On that first visit to China, encountering the archeological relics unearthed at imperial burial grounds in Xi'an had moved me to attempt and find a way to explore links across cultures and between ancient and contemporary lives. Since my art has been an embodiment of memories and experiences with a particular focus on interaction with nature, I set out to make a body of works, consisting of both paintings and three dimensional objects that draw on the landscape and engage with ancient burial practices. Burial sites, memorials and other forms of commemoration are carved out of the environment as markers of human transiency. The artworks are, therefore, a site where the existential tension between human transiency and the perpetuity of the natural environment is played out. The overall title – *Shifting Horizons* - encapsulates many of the ideas and themes that are investigated in this body of work, whose imagery places side by side nature-based elements with ancient Chinese funerary artefacts. The exhibition's main component is a sequence of rice paper scrolls entitled '*Cline*', which is supplemented by objects - *Repository* boxes and an army of clay angels - all of which are an aesthetic response to experiencing the interrelationship between Chinese ancient cultural practices and their environmental context.



above: visual diary, an artist book  
right: partial installation of *Shifting Horizons* at the Tamworth Regional Gallery 2016.





### ***[Cline series]***

The series, comprising of 34 vertical compositions on delicate rice paper scrolls, juxtaposes screen-printed images of Emperor Qin's terracotta army, which I had photographed on site, with painted fragments of nature. Extending over 25 meters long, the scrolls offer the viewer a journey across time and across generic aspects of the landscape. It is a pictorial journey that unfolds with the march of the terracotta warriors from visibility to invisibility across an unforgiving Nature. Looking at these fragments of an ancient empire protruding out of sandy pits, it was clear that the natural context had been pivotal not only in deciding the location for the emperors' burial sites, but also for the preservation and wear of the monument. Mountains, forests and rivers that surround the city would have provided an auspicious setting, materials (clay and wood), as well as waterways for ease of transport, while the shifting

dunes and drifting sand have added a temporal element to the confluence of forces that have since acted upon the place. Today, in the actual pits, sculptured body parts, animal bones, wagon wheels and other clay objects are scattered around, emerging from sand, ash and dust. Desert dust is everywhere. It covers the monumental clay army, as well as the mausoleum and the city. In fact the Chinese empire grew out of the loess dust that had blown from the Ordos desert, north of the first capital city, Xi'an. The drifted dust highlights the contrast between the permanence of the imperial monuments and the wandering of those who would have inhabited the region. The rulers immortalised in clay, jade, and bronze, versus the nomads, carrying ideas and goods, who for centuries would have wandered in the arid terrains between Xi'an and the west, leaving only fossilized footprints in the crusted soil. Ironically the rulers and their spectacular monuments have, by now, mostly turned to dust.

The term 'cline' possesses both biological and linguistic connotations - it refers to a continuum with

numerous gradations from one extreme to the other. The intention is to draw attention to historical continuities, and, in the context of this particular piece, to emphasise the link between the ancient landscapes of China and those of my own experiences in the natural environment. In some of the rice paper scrolls, the presence of natural forces is hinted at, as in the ambiguity presented in scrolls depicting dust, fog and smoke that render the landscape and the ancient relics almost indiscernible. In other instances, panels showing images of the terracotta army are intercepted with painting of distinct parts of the landscape, such as mountains, sand dunes, grasses and forests.

There is no attempt to replicate here a particular vista. Rather the painted fragments of nature present personal remembered experiences in the landscape. The faded images visible through gaps in the painted sections, allow the imagination to make up what is absent. Just like the surface of the land that encloses in its layers possible narratives of activities, both human and non-human, so the surface

of the artworks takes the viewer on a journey into memory and imagination uncovering possible personal and collective narratives.

Furthermore, by bringing together the mechanical reproduced image of the photograph with the gestural marks of the painting process, the scrolls provide a space in which to explore the complex relationship between the innate characteristics of these two processes. The photographed warriors are integrated with layers of paint that have been applied in a rhythmic squiggly manner. The textured materiality of the oil paint is contrasted with the smoothness of the printed photograph. The artwork's surface demonstrates the labour-intensive painting activity, compared with the suggested automatic process that produces a photograph. As such the artworks steer the viewer towards a multitude of issues ranging from highlighting the difference between the two mediums, to cross-cultural issues and their consequences, and to the natural environment.





*cline* (detail) 2015-16, oil and tempera on rice paper, 34 panels @ 140x70cm each



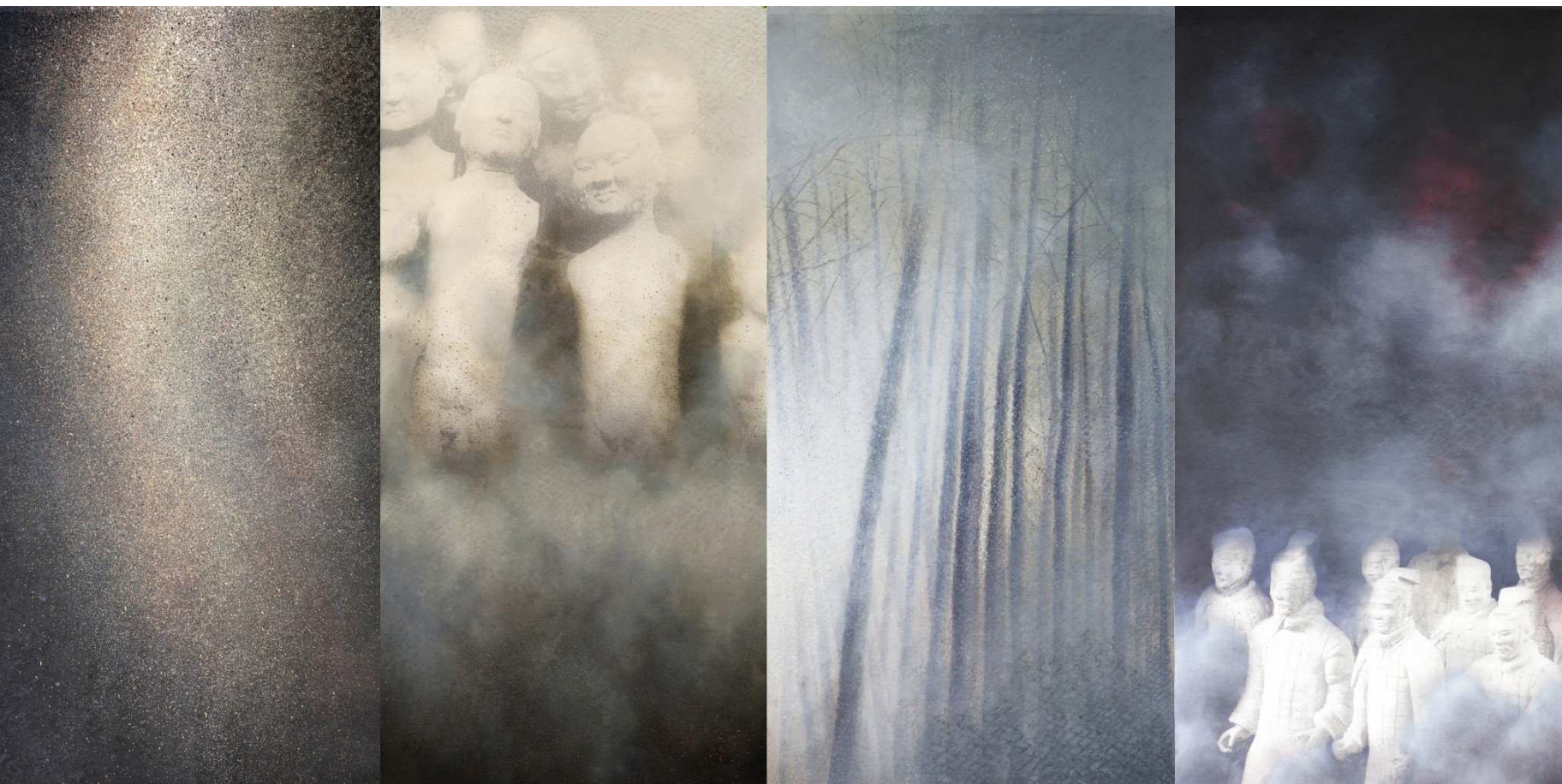




*cline* (detail) 2015-16, oil and tempera on rice paper, 34 panels @ 140x70cm each

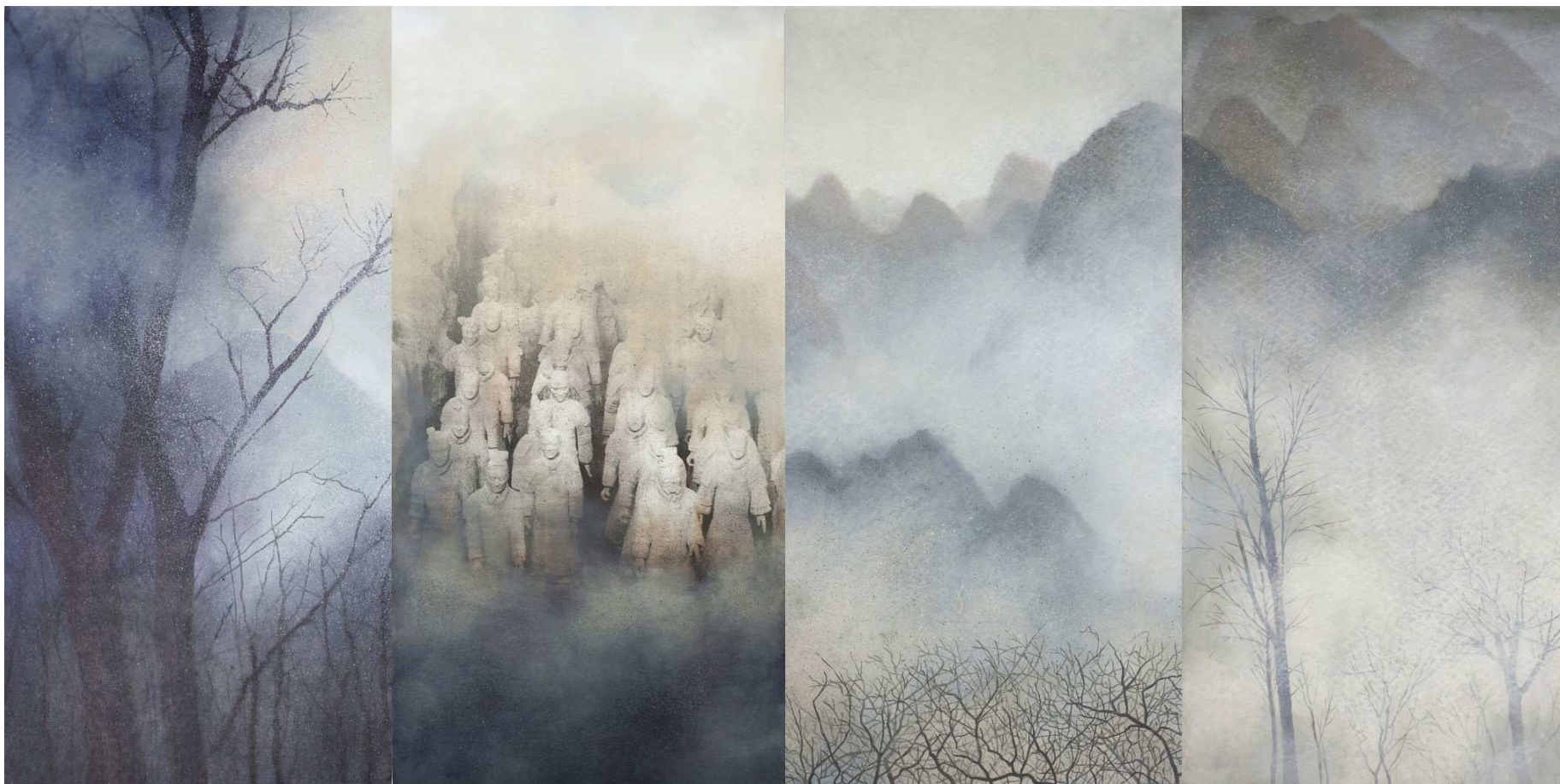






*cline* (detail) 2015-16, oil and tempera on rice paper, 34 panels @ 140x70cm each











### ***[repositories series]***

The Chinese journeys have inspired me to expand my practice, and to include making objects in addition to painting and drawing. The various objects I have subsequently made draw on the materials used by the craftsmen who had created funerary objects for the imperial tombs in ancient China.

Referencing Emperor Qin's burial site, the *Repositories* series was inspired by a particular chamber, which archaeologists speculate was the headquarters of the terracotta army. Each of the 9 repositories is shaped to resemble an open book, with a concave-convex dialectic between the two sides of the work. As historical reliquaries these artworks offer the viewer a space in which to reflect

on issues relating to mourning and memory. Their two-sided structure welcomes a dialogue about the customs of burials and commemorations in different cultures, and draws attention to shifting principles that govern social and cultural practices, with a particular focus on the complexity and diversity of disposing of the dead.

The texture of each of the repository-boxes was made to look like the packed earth of the chamber's surface. Nestled within their hollowed side are tiny clay figures and objects. They recall the Han Dynasty sculptural tomb pottery pieces that symbolise items the deceased person would need in the afterlife. Yet, the small clay objects I placed in the sand-filled cavity of each box, draw on burial practices of other cultures, whilst onto the convex side I attached two-dimensional mixed-media artworks depicting images from the Chinese tradition.



***repository #1*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm





***repository #2*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm



**repository #3** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm



***repository #4*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm





***repository #5*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm



***repository #6*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm



***repository #7*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm





***repository #8*** 2015, mixed media 40x70x10cm



## **[angels]**

By experimenting with the possibilities of clay and its metamorphic associations I found a different mode of expression through which to make links between historical and contemporary practices. While artists have continue to adapt the use of the material to their own purposes, the basic principles of modelling and firing clay have not been changed since the prehistoric periods.

As an analogy to the emperor's clay army I made a clay *army of angels*. Both armies - warriors and angels - evoke a multiplicity of analytical frameworks and connect to issues relating to burial and commemoration, to otherness, to trauma and suffering and to the forces of nature. Hundreds of clay angels, all of which are cast from two distinct moulds, exploit the transformative characteristics of the material and its ability to receive imprints and impressions. The subsequent Saggar firing process burns out the water out and hardens the pliable white

left:  
warriors at the Han Yangling Museum, Xi'an



raku-clay figure to become an angel of black baked earth. I used the material as a metaphor through which ideas could articulate themselves. Instead of evoking the angel as ephemerally gently passing through feathery clouds, or breezing through treetops, they emerge out of the sand, awkwardly negotiating dunes; cumbersome messengers and warriors impeded by the earthy material of which they are composed.

Most individuals upon hearing the word 'angel' think of Christianity and its associated portrayal of angels. Many assume that only Christianity and Judaism believe in such creatures and that, since Jewish law prohibits such representations, mostly Christian artists have portrayed them. However, the idea of the 'angel' appears in most cultures and traditions - in classical myth from Japan through the Middle East to the Americas, in shamanic visions, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam. Angels are older than the Jewish bible, where they are first encountered by most Western people, and believed to be 'invented' by Zarathustra, going back to around

1500 BCE (about 500 years before the belief in the Jewish God). Regardless of the origin of the concept, archaeological and anthropological findings indicate that angels were part of pre-historic belief systems.

Arriving at the idea of an angel to be part of this project has been unexpected. My upbringing, as a secular individual, included neither God's angels nor the devil's demons. The angel's historical narratives have not cast a spell over my imagination, and I have considered angels to be an irrational invention of biblical stories, which in turn, inspired religious paintings. A certain sentiment in me had resisted this unanticipated engagement with angels. Yet intrigued, I have let this incongruous winged ethereal creature become a propelling vector throughout the research and development of *Shifting Horizons*.

As an agency of the imagination the angel draws attention to the threshold between visibility and invisibility, between absence and substance, between order and disorder. In addition to effecting shifts between modes of existence, the angel, symbolises the utter 'otherness' I found China to be.

*army of angels* 2015-17,  
saggar fired raku clay





...angels emerging out of the sand, awkwardly negotiating dunes.







*still life: grove* 2016, clay, sand, wooden tray 60x90cm h-10cm

During the time of the Han Dynasty, aside from emperors who had the privilege to be buried with armies of clay warriors, other high officials also had figures such as performers and protective warriors placed in their tombs to accompany them to the afterlife. With the development of farming, influential landlords would be buried with clay objects that portrayed scaled-down scene of the farm and of daily life. Inspired by these clay sceneries, I made the '*still life*' series, which consists of several trays filled with sand in which I arranged clay objects.

In *Still life: Grove* I placed in the sand scores of thinly rolled sheets of blackened clay. The piece recalls ancient scrolls and their function in recording and transmitting information. The arrangement of the clay scrolls in the sand suggests remains of a burnt forest in a barren ground and offers a multitude of semaphoric pathways. Mainly it is contemplation on the transference of culture throughout history and on environments that have been devastated by wars and atrocities.





*still life* 2016, clay, sand, wooden tray 45x60cm h-10cm



*still life: grove 1* 2016, clay, sand, wooden tray 45x60cm h-10cm





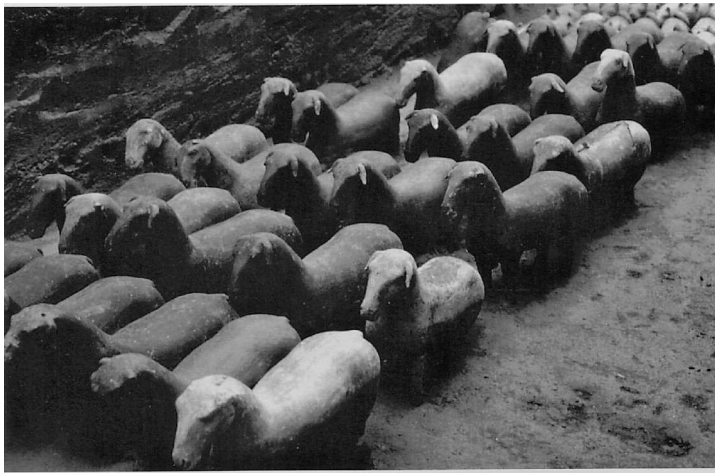
partial installation of *Shifting Horizons* at the Tamworth Regional Gallery 2016.



This body of works can be seen as instances of cyclical transformation connected to natural processes of growth and decay. In its particular way, this body of work is an intermixing of symbolic means employed to point out that, in contrast to the surviving fragments of the terracotta army in the burial pits, the natural world is not a dead world and perhaps it is most essential to the survival of human life. *Shifting Horizons* is guided by the idea that cultural practices exist in relation to the environment and are rooted in a social and historical context. By evoking remains of the dead in the landscape, the artworks highlight the notion that landscapes are infused with mourning and memories and as such have a significant historical dimension. The artworks, inspired by the archaeological finding in the burial grounds of Xi'an, take the viewer on a journey across cultures, across time zones and across a landscape which is oblivious to us and our cultural constructions. By juxtaposing images of Chinese ancient funerary artefacts with aspects of nature, the works emphasise the immeasurable age of the natural world in relation to the temporality of human perspective, and offer the spectator a space in which to reflect on instances connected to cyclical natural processes of growth and decay.

Hanna Kay. 2018





relics at Emperor Qinshihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum (left) at the Han Yangling Museum (above). Xi'an





all artworks and photographs by Hanna Kay  
photography of artworks by Leslie Wand  
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