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Saito at Haines

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by Kenneth Baker

After a conceptual detour into casting in bronze objects such as cardboard sheets and stretched canvases, Bay Area sculptor Yoshitomo Saito has returned to forms plucked from nature in his show at Haines.

"Colorado Loop #3" (2009) looks obtusely simple at a glance: a bronze casting of one or more - it's hard to tell - slender branches or saplings wound into a circular loop that apparently can stand unsupported.

Few besides other sculptors may appreciate the technical difficulty of making such an accurate cast, but anyone can see its reminiscence of the "enso," or freehand brushed circles, that recur in Asian, especially Japanese art, as symbols of the unity of the universe or the mind.

Also striking is the way the piece opens a sort of gateway in space, like the mouth of an invisible tunnel.

Most of Saito's pieces have complexities such as these embedded in their ostensible realism.

His "1000 Prayers" (2010-11) presents an elliptical wall array of 1,000 individually cast pinecones. From varying distances it reads as marathon realism, as a pine forest seen from above, even as a metaphorical galaxy. With "1000 Prayers" - also the title of the show - he refers to the ongoing aftermath of the March earthquake and tsunami. Pines traditionally symbolize longevity and dignity in Japanese art, so Saito's cones implicitly evoke hope for regeneration.

Do not overlook the small room at Haines. There three sculptures - one each by Zhan Wang, Ai Weiwei and Darren Waterston - send insinuations and improbable formal affinities ricocheting around the room to dreamlike effect.

Yoshitomo Saito: 1000 Prayers: Sculpture. Through Aug. 27. Haines Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 397-8114. www.hainesgallery.com.



"Colorado Loop #3" (2009), unique bronze by Yoshitomo Saito, opens a sort of gateway in space.