

ArtReview

Keiji Uematsu *Invisible Force*

Simon Lee Gallery, London 8 April – 5 May

Mono-ha, the Japanese art movement with which Keiji Uematsu is most closely associated, is typically translated as 'school of things'. And yet, as Uematsu's first UK show reveals, the concept isn't actually that great a fit for the sixty-nine-year old: mainly because his practice just doesn't seem particularly 'thingy'. His 1970s work, especially, encompasses photography and performance to a much greater extent than most of his Mono-ha contemporaries, who principally or exclusively worked in sculpture, which is perhaps why he's been slightly left out of the current revival of interest in the movement. And even his actual sculptural works – which in this exhibition date from only the past few years – don't emphasise their own materiality and object-hood the way core Mono-ha works do. Instead, Uematsu's primary focus has always been on forces – on the invisible interplay of tension and balance – rather than actual matter itself.

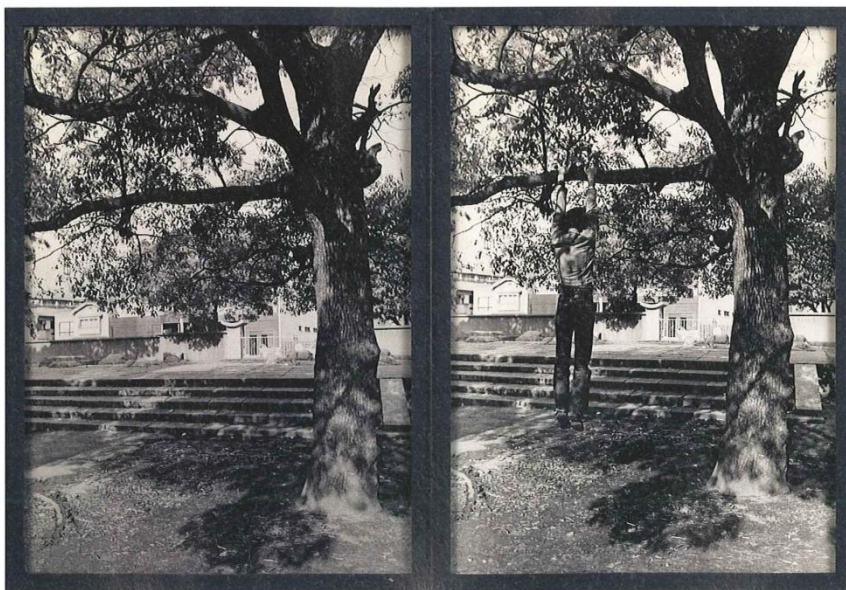
Two sculptures encapsulate this. *Floating form – invisible axis* (2015) consists of a two-metre-long copper cylinder suspended just above the floor by a steel cable that loops up through a ceiling-tie and tethers at the other end to a craggy rock on the ground, the cable being so

thin that for a moment it seems like the sideways cylinder is hovering in space. Not that you're meant permanently to be taken in. Rather, the point is to generate an atmosphere of artifice and contrivance – with the gently swaying weight resembling some strange, otherworldly prop, and even the anchoring rock looking somehow unreal – so that the physical facts of the work seem to pale before the greater, eternal truths of the forces being invoked: the downward pull of gravity, and the counteracting tension in the wire. And there's a similar sense to *Cutting – triangle* (2016), where two unequal sections of wooden beam are hung horizontally by an inverted 'V' of rope that's hooked to the wall, with the beams' touching ends not quite sitting square – this misalignment being, of course, a measure of the imbalance between their respective lengths and thus their weights. The piece becomes like a mathematical illustration, its outward form a mere accident, its physical arrangement the result, indeed, of physics.

This illustrative ethos extends to Uematsu's photographs from 1973 – two years before he left Japan and moved to Düsseldorf, where he still resides. The works are all pairs of sequential

shots: a long plank of wood lying on the ground with a slack rope attached, in the first frame of *Board/Man/Rope*, followed by Uematsu leaning back on the tilting plank while supporting himself with the taut rope; or, in *Vertical Position*, an upright wooden block within an empty doorway that, once Uematsu lifts it aloft in the subsequent image, is precisely the right height to reach the lintel. The same basic, inherent forces and dimensions, these images seem to state, were present all along – it just took the artist dynamically to complete the composition and make you realise it.

Sometimes, though, an idea doesn't even have to be literally realised. That's the message, presumably, behind his hugely tall charcoal drawings, all titled *Situation – gravity axis* (2016), which represent side-on views of oblong shapes – perhaps more long planks or cylinders – stacked and balanced in precarious positions. The accurate, two-dimensional modelling acts almost like a rebuttal of mainstream Mono-ha ideology: a statement that, as long as the fundamental rules of physics are honourably observed, the final form of a work can be as unreal or whimsical as you like. *Gabriel Coxhead*



Tree/Man 1, 1973, two vintage gelatin silver prints, each 76 × 55 cm.
Photo: Todd-White Art Photography. Courtesy the artist;
Simon Lee Gallery, London & Hong Kong; and Yumiko Chiba Associates, Tokyo