



Tania Kovats's *TREE* (2009), installed at London's Natural History Museum to mark Charles Darwin's bicentenary.

ART

Taking the long view of nature

A monograph highlights how artist Tania Kovats views geological and evolutionary time, notes **Colin Martin**.

To celebrate Charles Darwin's bicentenary in 2009, a 70-metre longitudinal section of an oak tree was embedded in the ceiling of London's Natural History Museum. *TREE* (2009) is the work of British artist Tania Kovats. Two decades of her reflections on geological structures and evolutionary change are now celebrated in an illustrated monograph.

The passage of time is a constant theme. Many of Kovats's installations mimic geological processes, including erosion, eruption, compression and subsidence. In her replica mountain-making machine *Mountain* (2001), layers of black, white and grey wax buckle and fold as they are compressed by a piston.

The apparatus is based on one used by the nineteenth-century American engineer Bailey Willis to demonstrate how the Appalachian Mountains were formed. Other sculptures

shown in the book evoke the basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, the slashed geometries of strike-slip faulting, the structures of minerals and geological maps.

Drawing is central to Kovats's practice, and some of her fine preparatory pencil sketches of geological works, tree rings and silhouettes are reproduced. Kovats observes the natural world as accurately as any scientist, but her art is more than a direct record. For example, *The Museum of the White Horse* (2007) — inspired by the Uffington White Horse, a giant equine form cut into Oxfordshire chalk downland by Bronze Age artists — assembles drawings and horse-related paraphernalia in a gaily decorated



Tania Kovats
JEREMY MILLAR AND PHILIP HOARE
Lund Humphries:
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horsebox to comment on humanity's varied relationship with the horse throughout history.

In December 2009, Kovats travelled in Darwin's footsteps to the Galapagos Islands to observe geological and biological morphologies on vastly different scales — from volcanoes to barnacles. The drawings that resulted include her sketch of the battered copy of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle* that she brought with her. Work by Kovats, and another 11 artists who have undertaken Gulbenkian residencies on the Galapagos Islands, will tour Edinburgh, Liverpool and Lisbon next year.

Kovats's interest in the changing landscape fuels her latest artwork. This summer she plans to launch a wet-meadow raft, complete with waterbird nests, along a London canal to provide hassled city dwellers with a restorative glimpse of nature. ■

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