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'Hai Bo: Perspectives' photo exhibit at the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery

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"Perspectives: Hai Bo" isn't a huge show. Just five large-scale photographs in the pavilion of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. Still, its themes loom large.

Taken from the artist's "Four Seasons" series, four of the pictures are essentially the same shot. (An unrelated fifth image is included as a bonus.) Each of the four depicts a park in the town of Changchun, in Jilin province, where the contemporary Chinese artist grew up. He can be seen in each one, sitting on a stone bench beneath the spreading branches of a tree, always in the same position, staring off to the left.

One was taken in the dead of winter. Snow is on the ground. The tree is bare. Another was taken during the first budding of spring. The next, in summer, shows the tree in full green. The small pond in the foreground is filled with water. The fourth was made in autumn, after the leaves have fallen, and the water has dried up. Shot between 2000 and 2002, "Four Seasons" expresses both nature's beauty -- the pictures tie in nicely with the Enid A. Haupt Garden just outside -- but also, according to the artist, "time's eternity." The circle of life, etc.

It's a bit more complicated than that.

What's perhaps most interesting about the series is how little the artist himself changes, especially compared with nature's dramatic transformations. Other than wearing different clothing -- sandals and shirt sleeves in summer; jacket and closed-toe shoes in winter -- he looks essentially the same over the course of two years, almost frozen in the amber of time.

And that's odd, considering that, when he is dead and gone, the tree will probably still be standing, as will the park, albeit not in precisely the same condition. In Hai Bo's lifetime alone -- he was born in 1962 -- Changchun has gone from a rural farming community to a growing city.

In the words of curator Carol Huh, the show is an exercise in looking. Visitors scrutinize its images -- which also include a picture of a solitary bicyclist riding off into a shroud of fog -- looking for subtle signs of aging.

They're not there.

That's because Hai Bo's work isn't about what changes so much as it is about what endures. And that includes even the people who grow up, grow old and disappear. They're still there, these pictures tell us, if only in our memories.

Perspectives: Hai Bo Through Feb. 27 at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Ave. SW (Metro: Smithsonian). 202-633-1000. <http://www.asia.si.edu>. Hours: Daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission: Free.



"Four Seasons: Summer" (Courtesy Of The Hai Bo - Max Protetch Gallery)