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Kota Ezawa at Haines

Kota Ezawa's animated remakes of modern-day icons remind me of Andy Warhol's portraits. But instead of the latest pop idols and politicians, Ezawa, a young German-Japanese artist based in San Francisco, mines our collective memory for culturally loaded but not necessarily current material: the O.J. Simpson trial, for example, which was the subject of his last film (*The Simpson Verdict*, 2002).

For his new piece, the two-channel digital video loop *Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey* (2003), Ezawa has translated two clips from the 1966 movie *Who's*

Afraid of Virginia Woolf? into a black-and-white cartoon whose simplified, unmodulated images recall Alex Katz's portraits or the cutouts of Henri Matisse. The animations play in large, side-by-side projections, with soundtracks taken from the original film.

Ezawa has distilled the original film to two of its dramatic peaks. The left projection (37 seconds) shows the scene in which Richard Burton chants, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" as he spins Sandy Dennis around; she becomes sick to her stomach and rushes to the bathroom. The projection on the right (90 seconds) culminates in Burton scaring everyone to death by aiming a rifle at his wife's head; when he fires it, however, it merely produces a loud pop and an open umbrella. Because of their varying running times, the scenes intersect at different points throughout. The dual soundtracks add to the cacophony, loudly led by Elizabeth Taylor's surly contralto.

Seeing these torrid scenes through the cool semi-anonymity of a black-and-white cartoon is itself a marvel, but what really galvanizes the scenes is Ezawa's editing of the figures so that they shift unpredictably between stillness and staccato or fluid movements. A shot of Taylor sitting on the couch with George Segal is as motionless as a painting until her arm, bending like a lever, suddenly brings a cigarette to her mouth. When Burton wanders off to get his trick rifle, his floating gait and mechanical head movements resemble a moonwalk, part Michael Jackson and part Terminator. The idiosyncratic look of Ezawa's animation is the result of his having re-

Still from Kota Ezawa's *Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey*, 2003, two-channel digital projection; at Haines.



drawn the figures and backgrounds using computer software, rather than processing the original film digitally.

Ezawa is clearly conscious of 1960s painting. Besides the works' Warholian aspects, there are the screen-filling, Lichtenstein-like close-ups of a single laughing or frightened face. (The title may also refer to the famous Barnett Newman series "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue.") When all the shouting is over, it is hard to say what lingers: the dialogue with appropriation, which is like a secret language between artists, or a timeless tragedy of American marriage and mores.

—Melissa E. Feldman