

ART PAPERS

JULY / AUGUST 2005

SANTA MONICA

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag's discussion of the growing power of photography, she posits that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed." She sees photographs as evidence, pieces of the world, and quotations. In his recent installation *On Photography* [Santa Monica Museum of Art; March 5—May 14, 2005], San Francisco artist **Kota Ezawa** appropriates images from the history of photography, reducing them to flat graphic reproductions that are then digitized and presented as animations or, as in this installation, as a 35mm slide show in a darkened room, using a single projector.

Ezawa's installation consists of a continuous sequence of twenty slides that, representing moments in the history of photography, are accessible at any point in the sequence. The slide show presentation also alludes to the teaching of the histories of art and photography. If Ezawa includes a number of photographers discussed by Sontag in her book—Arbus, Stieglitz, and Sander, for example—, he also includes lesser-known artists. Among the earliest images are a Mathew Brady battle scene, Stieglitz's 291 Gallery, a Walker Evans barber shop, Garry Winogrand's photograph of a couple at a zoo holding monkeys as if they are their children, and Diane Arbus' *Jewish Giant*. Ezawa's referencing of Sontag engages his project in the critical dialogue regarding how one looks at and interprets imagery.

Using mass media as the source for his works, Ezawa transforms his subjects into flat two-dimensional graphics. Distilled to the essentials, the image is then reproduced. In *The Simpson*



Kota Ezawa, still from *On Photography*, 2005, slide installation, dimensions variable (courtesy of the Santa Monica Museum of Art)

Verdict, 2002, Ezawa uses news footage from the trial's last three minutes as source material. Ridding images of their details, he leaves us with a cartoon-like animation simulating the proceedings's tense conclusion. Coupled with the event's actual sound track, this animation reveals details that may previously have been overlooked. Similarly in *Lennon*, Sontag, *Beuys*, 2004, he layers the original sound tracks over digital animations of their respective performances.

If Ezawa replays appropriationist strategies, he does more than simply represent the originals. He abates them, purposely leaving out information, shaping reality into a cartoon. Walter Benjamin once wrote, "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art." Aware of the effects of mechanical reproduction, Ezawa replaces this withered 'aura' with another, through a complex process of image transformation.

Ezawa's images are recognizable because the shapes and structure of the original remain intact. In essence, he reduces the photograph to flat gray tones, making a vector-based rendering of the photographic image. Do images so reduced to their essential shapes lose their aura? No. They are reinvested with a new aura and a new essence. They transform into interpretation—to choose twenty images to represent the history of photography is to offer an interpretation.

Ezawa's greatest hits also include Robert Mapplethorpe, The Bechers, Gordon Matta-Clark, Yves Klein, Catherine Opie, Jeff Wall, and Cindy Sherman. As the works of many of these artists fall outside the traditional definition of photography, Ezawa may be suggesting that the boundary between art and photography has dissolved, just as the boundary between traditional image making and digital manipulation should be reevaluated.

While Ezawa makes deliberate choices in the images and the scenarios he reproduces, his work offers less of a critique than a reinterpretation. Seductive and engaging, it presents a visually stylized translation.

—Jody Zellen

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