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ART REVIEW

Life, One Frame At a Time

By Benjamin Genocchio

NEW good artists generate considerable excitement nowadays, the more so because there are so few who are really good. One of them is Kota Ezawa, who is exhibiting two of his recent works in Hartford at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art as part of the museum's matrix program.

Born in Cologne, Germany, in 1969, Mr. Ezawa went to California in 1994 on a scholarship from the German government to study at the San Francisco Art Institute. He ended up staying in this country, completing graduate art studies at Stanford University in 2003.

Mr. Ezawa makes computer-generated animations of popular television, film and photographic images that are reminiscent of old-fashioned cartoons. Vibrantly colored and stylized, these animations are then presented as digital projections or films, or in slide shows.

What is novel about Mr. Ezawa's animations is that, for the most part, he does them by hand. Rather than simply filtering his source images through software technology to make them look like animations, he manually reconstructs them, frame by frame, along with all of the motions and movements on a computer using drawing software. It is very labor intensive, even sort of irrational.

The subject matter of the images is diverse, ranging from politics and finance to the arts and sciences. But Mr. Ezawa's best works deal with culturally charged events, like a 2002 animated remake of the handing down of the verdict in the O. J. Simpson trial. The animation was based on television footage from inside the courtroom, overlaid with the original soundtrack. It is riveting.

This exhibition, put together by Joanna Marsh, the Wadsworth's associate curator of contemporary art, presents two of the artist's projects from this year, "The History of Photography Remix," an animated 35-millimeter slide installation, and "The Unbearable Lightness of Being," an animated 16-millimeter film. Both works draw on imagery from what might be described as our collective cultural memory.

"The Unbearable Lightness of Being" takes the title of the book by Milan Kundera, and is a short animated film version of the assassinations of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. Abraham Zapruder's famous 8-millimeter film footage is the source of the Kennedy imagery, while scenes from D. W. Griffith's film "The Birth of a Nation" (1915) inspired the Lincoln segment.

Like all Mr. Ezawa's animations, the source imagery is radically simplified, stylized and then washed in Day-Glo colors; visually, results resemble a South Park cartoon. But there is no sound, forcing you to concentrate solely on the horrific events unfolding before you, albeit with a kind of childish simplicity. It is quite disconcerting.

The remake of the Kennedy assassination footage is the most troublesome to watch. Partly, I guess, it is because we know it is real, rather than, like the Lincoln segment, based on a fictional re-creation. And partly, also, it is because it is closer to us in time, an event that touched our lives. Transforming it into a cartoon seems a bit glib.

But let's not be moralistic. Looking at this animation, I kept wondering to myself how much of what captivates me about this work is the artist's labor-intensive animation process, and how much is what may be described as a feeling of profound historical loss. In short, is it the historical footage or the artistic intervention that fascinates?

"The History of Photography Remix" can leave you mulling over the same sort of questions. Here, instead of historical film footage, the artist has made a slide installation out of still animations of historical photographs. The work uses 40 photographs, many famous works of art photography or photojournalism depicting unforgettable faces or events.

But here the animation adds a level of mystery or intrigue to their identification. Watching the installation is like playing a popular-culture game show; up comes a slide, and you have five seconds to guess the artist or subject before it disappears and another arrives. It can be fun to play this with friends, competing to recognize images.

The answers, in case you are wondering, include well-known images by Ansel Adams, Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, among others. There are also images of the Allied liberation of Nazi concentration camps, nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll, and documentation of a rash of U.F.O. sightings from the early 1950's.

Watching this rapid-fire installation induces image-intoxication, which you would have to be a real curmudgeon to resist entirely. It is seductive and yet also thoughtful, flipping the promise of pleasure into an open question about our image-riddled culture; how is it that certain images gain traction in our collective memory?