

MAY 2006

SAN FRANCISCO

Kota Ezawa at Cheryl Haines

On Dec. 22, 1895, a German physician named William Conrad Röntgen set his wife's hand on a photographic plate and made the world's first human X-ray. Seared into our collective memory, that image of Frau Röntgen's bare bones, punctuated by a single bulbous ring, is instantly recognizable in Kota Ezawa's "History of Photography Remix," though his version literally—crucially—looks nothing like the original. Ezawa's technique—applied in this exhibition to iconic images ranging from official photographs of nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll to Annie Leibovitz's portrait of a naked John Lennon clinging to a clothed Yoko Ono—is to cut out the basic contours of a picture's main elements from sheets of colored paper, layering them to create intimate framed collages. In other cases, he creates his pictures on a computer, scanning images and then drawing silhouettes in Adobe Illustrator to create flattened renditions of Mathew Brady's Civil War dead, for instance, or Diane Arbus's Jewish giant.

The images—stripped of all internal detail and reduced to light and shadow—are presented in various formats. This show contained eight collages, one of them a diptych, most not more than a foot in width; 10 enlarged transparencies on aluminum

lightbox; and projections in a 40-frame slide show. Pictures such as Garry Winogrand's *Central Park Zoo* or one of Bernd and Hilla Becher's water towers radiate through their wall-mounted lightboxes as starkly as silhouettes through a curtained window.

A similar reductive technique underlies *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a 16-millimeter silent animation depicting the Lincoln and Kennedy assassinations, one after the other. Yet the brief loop is most striking for the effectiveness with which it collapses history and myth; while the Lincoln sequence is derived from D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, and the Kennedy segment comes from Abraham Zapruder's

eyewitness footage, Ezawa's version literally flattens the differences of the events to evoke their equivalent status, beyond fact and fiction, in our national imagination. Ezawa focuses our attention on icons that we recognize instantly, only to realize how much is missing. Through the simplified imagery of "The History of Photography Remix," we find our collective memory is as fleeting, as inadequate to lived experience, as the shadows on the walls of Plato's cave.

—Jonathon Keats



Kota Ezawa: *X-Ray*, 2005, paper cutout, 10 by 6 3/4 inches; at Cheryl Haines.