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REVIEWS

Northern California

Kota Ezawa at Haines Gallery

Watching the evening news after seeing Kota Ezawa's *History of*

Photography series, you might wonder if you ever left the gallery. Both Ezawa and CNN put on convincing versions of historical events, plucking images from miles of film to represent posterity—and in those edits we detect the manufacture of history, the makings of a selective memory. What turns film into news is not so different from what turns film into art: it's about curation, selecting and juxtaposing imagery until it appears to represent a historical continuum. Edward R. Murrow drew our attention to this process, and Noam Chomsky decon-



Kota Ezawa, *Central Park Zoo*, 2006, Duratrans transparency and light box, 20" x 30", at Haines Gallery, San Francisco.

structed it for us—but Ezawa's *History of Photography* has taken the next step of making this complicated and complicating notion seem self-evident. The process of historical elimination has become deliberate and transparent (sometimes literally) in his thoughtful show of Photoshopped light-box drawings, handmade paper cutouts, slideshows and animation, singling out images not just from one reel but from the entire history of photography for our consideration. He provides no explanatory voiceovers, crosscuts or fades that might suggest a logical continuum of events, and toggles between digital and analog technologies so that neither wholly tricks the eye. But what might make for an unconvincing newscast becomes a wholly engrossing alternative account of history, represented here as an arrangement of shutter clicks that may or may not be related, except for the storyline we attach to them.

The context for the show is provided by none other than Susan Sontag, or rather Ezawa's image of her giving a speech at a lectern. Here Sontag is an uncharacteristically two-dimensional figure cut from paper in shades of 1970s faded-film brown, but for her red lipstick and the whites of her eyes and bared teeth. Reduced to these emblematic elements, her expression hovers between amused and feral, so that viewers might equally imagine her elaborating on *Notes on Camp* or defending *On Photography*. But by situating Sontag near the gallery door like a sentry, Ezawa evokes her cautionary note in *On Photography* that the best readings of photography come not from strictly formal appreciation, but from what she called "moralists"—those who are troubled by the convincing beauty of photography even as they are seduced by it.

Ezawa's *Sontag* was not included in the version of this show that premiered at the 2005 Art Basel Miami, where almost all Ezawa's light-box editions sold out; one wonders if even in paper form, Sontag might have provided a critical counterpoint to the seemingly unmitigated avidity of collectors. This role was performed by an unlikely Sontag understudy: the murdered moppet JonBenet

Ramsey, whose image was the only one of Ezawa's editioned light-box works collectors proved hesitant to acquire in Miami. Perhaps Sontag's presence might also have given pause for reflection to the fair-goer who made the strange accusation to Haines Gallery representative that Ezawa's light box re-creation of Gary Winogrand's 1962 *Central Park Zoo* was "racist," ostensibly because it shows an interracial couple holding a pair of chimps.

Has it really come to this, that we object to history by objecting to art? Ezawa's *Central Park Zoo* is surely a provocation to anyone with cable TV and a Web connection, accustomed as we are to explanatory captions, soundbite callouts and running blog commentary. Winogrand's photograph was black and white, but conceptually, formally, and yes, morally, Ezawa's distilled light-box version is shades of gray. We are left to fill in the details and context around the iconic image for ourselves; ultimately, we cannot demand that the image explain itself, any more than we might ask that of history.

The History of Photography does have a faint air of anachronism about it, through no fault no fault of Ezawa's. Now that 92 percent of cameras sold are digital and even Kodak is getting out of the film business, many of the technologies Ezawa heralds in his light-box images—Polaroid cameras, say, or silver gelatin prints—are becoming artifacts before our very eyes (David Pogue,

"Pixel Counting Joins Film in Obsolete Bin," *New York Times*, February 2, 2006). When the plug is pulled from Ezawa's light boxes and the images disappear into darkness, what then becomes of photography, and of the history it has etched in our minds? Without our perspective of earth seen as a whole from the moon, can we still conceive of globalization, a World Wide Web, global warming, the Whole Earth Catalog? That these visual memories belong not to us, but to a photographer, somehow becomes beside the point: Even though we only ever saw it on TV after the fact, we say we remember the Kennedy assassination, or the moon landing, or the OJ Simpson verdict—all of which have found their way into Ezawa's body of work, like afterimages of a stunned public.

Herein lies the power of resonant images such as Annie Leibovitz's *John and Yoko*, taken in 1980 just before Lennon was shot, as well as Ezawa's version of it. While Lennon famously implored us to imagine a world without boundaries, Leibovitz has gone ahead and presented it as a fait accompli, showing how gender and race between lovers becomes as interchangeable and dispensable as clothing. Recaptured by Ezawa as a paper cutout with only minimal information, the image is still immediately recognizable not just as a truth, or the truth, but a personal truth, a piece of paper that has become part of our experience and expectations.

This is one of Ezawa's first shows utterly without spoken narrative, yet it is rich with discourse—which, as Sontag would be the first to remind us, is still vital to the discipline of photography. Ezawa's reassertion of discourse has the strange effect of seeming radical at this particular historical moment, which is increasingly defined by live video feeds rather than ponderous text.

Gone are the days when history was dominated by royal decrees and papal bulls; now it's as though a bill doesn't exist until it's discussed on C-Span. We find it difficult to fathom a historic event without photographic evidence: If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to capture it with a camcorder, does it make a sound? Or to put that less esoterically: If 2,000 U.S. soldiers fall in Iraq and not one makes the evening news, do they actually make an impact? In this image-conscious context, Ezawa's carefully inex-

act and deeply reflective re-creation of the history of photography is hardly an academic pursuit, or a casual exercise in art history; it is a poignant social commentary, and our shared history in the making.

—Alison Bing

Kota Ezawa: *The History of Photography Remix* closed February 11 at Haines Gallery, San Francisco.

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