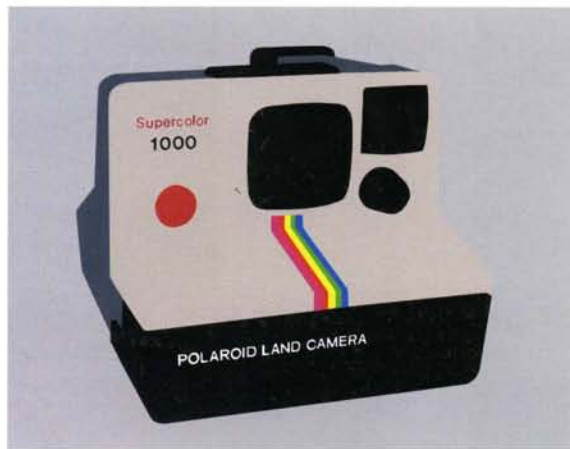


contemporary

Fall 2006

FROM A TO Z AND BACK AGAIN

CHUCK MOBLEY EXPLORES KOTA EZAWA'S ARTISTIC PROCESS



SAN Francisco-based artist Kota Ezawa stepped into the international spotlight two years ago with his three-minute digitally animated video *The Simpson Verdict* (2002), culled from the final minutes of the infamous OJ Simpson trial. This piece and his preceding video work, *Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey* (2003), and *Lennon Santag Beuys* (2004) have been exhibited at such venues as the 2004 Shanghai Biennial, the Andy Warhol Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and Hans Ulrich Obrist's group exhibition 'I Still Believe in Miracles' at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. This year Ezawa's one-minute 16mm film loop, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2005), depicting the assassinations of US presidents Lincoln and Kennedy, will appear alongside the Whitney Biennial in Maurizio Cattelan's 'The Wrong Gallery'.

In the last year Ezawa has turned his attention to the photograph in a new project 'The History of Photography Remix'. As with his video work, he uses seemingly random source material, this time gathered from art school slide libraries. By employing Photoshop's vector graphic process and its ostensibly appropriate by-product, parody, he subverts easy readings of historical photographic images. The effortless act of assumption the viewer commits in relation to the photograph is aggravated once the image has been mediated. Ezawa's undoing of the photograph stymies a straightforward recollection and the viewer is engaged in the act of reassembling the image from memory.

Ezawa's animated aesthetic, akin to the memorialised portraiture found on postage stamps, is accomplished by maintaining a flat tonal range. While a certain pop sensibility figures, his aesthetic style and working method owe more to David Hockney, Vik Muniz and Op Art than to Warhol and Pop Art. Colourful shapes in broad swathes erase the photograph's subtle tonality in favour of a lack of specificity and a sense of the familiar, leaving the viewer with only the latent residue of the appropriated image. Yet, paradoxically, when looking at Ezawa's final redux, the source image's intended meaning is amplified.

Ezawa finds a way around the camera and its program's rigidity by suggesting a picture of a picture or, rather, a reproduction of a reproduction. Staged as a slide show installation, 'The History of Photography Remix' is like waking up in an art history professor's nightmare (or wet dream); famous

image after famous image from photography's history alights the gallery wall in a maddening loop. The pedagogical becomes surreally overpowering and historical photographs, held sacrosanct by both museums and collectors alike, are transformed; these historical objects are, ironically, something that most of us will only come into contact with through reproductions and various vehicles of dissemination.

An interesting parallel begins to align with Ezawa's work, that of photography's long struggle to be taken seriously as an art form on a par with painting, offering deeper meaning to his choice of subject matter. The vector graphic process is a technique not dissimilar to pastels or oil paints, the only difference being that the medium is defined by numerical data rather than chemical make-up. A relentless push/pull dynamic between past and present, mediums and methods forms the tension in Ezawa's approach to his work. Reductive imagery offers a radical take on what the photograph has become, and perhaps was for most of its history beyond the realm of conceptual practice: an easy narrative illustration. Ezawa pushes the photograph back to its roots, reminding us that the mechanical reproduction of images grew from woodcuts to engraving to lithography before finally reaching its zenith in photography. It is through his reconstruction that the meaning of these photographs is revitalised. Through his process, Ezawa accesses the essence of each individual photograph, engaging the viewer in the act of recall to bring forth its accrued history.

This winter, Ezawa produced a series of intaglio prints while in residence at Paulson Press in Berkeley, California. The metamorphosis of images from photographic reproduction to vector graphic to slide film to intaglio print frames a laborious exploration of mechanical processes. At the press, lengthy days spent tracing directly onto copper plates found Ezawa invigorated, learning a new method. He admitted that it took some time getting used to drawing the old-fashioned way. Asked if he kept reaching for a phantom mouse he replied, 'No, I kept wanting to type apple z' – the undo command on his iBook.

CHUCK MOBLEY IS ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF SAN FRANCISCO CAMERAWORK



The Last Sitting, 2005. Opposite, from left: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 2005. Polaroid Land Camera, 2005. Courtesy: Haines Gallery, San Francisco, and Murray Guy, New York.