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## Emblems of an era as seen from a fresh medium

By Kenneth Baker

The work in Kota Ezawa's show at Haines looks like nothing much at first, but let it work on you.

On the walls hang light boxes. They display black and white images, some slightly, some vividly familiar, each stripped to patterns of flat shape and even tone that suggest cut-paper silhouettes. Several other framed pieces on view do translate photographs into cut-paper collage to underline the resemblance.

Ezawa has plucked images from the history of photography, some famous as artworks, others as publicity, as journalism, even as criminal evidence, and simplified them using digital graphics software.

Any American with memories of the '70s will readily recognize the source of "Hibernia Bank Robbery" (2005): a muzzy surveillance camera image of kidnapped heiress Patricia Hearst taking part in a bank heist with her Symbionese Liberation Army captors.

Nearby hangs Ezawa's "Water Tower" (2005), an image -- similarly drained of aesthetic complexity -- of an eight-legged spherical water tower in a railroad yard. Viewers who know the work of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher will think of it immediately, though perhaps not of a specific Becher. The Bechers are renowned for their studies of industrial architecture.



Courtesy of Haines Gallery

"Hibernia Bank Robbery" (2005), a lightbox by Kota Ezawa.

"3-D Movie" (2005) reprises a famous 1950s Life magazine photograph of a packed movie audience wearing cheap 3-D glasses, by the not-so-famous photographer J.R. Eyerman. Here the source image's comic effect, not the photographer's name or the occasion, has lodged it in memory. Ezawa reminds us that it remains in play as a symbol of conformity and of popular hunger for synthetic experience.

Ezawa's slide projection piece, "History of Photography Remix" accelerates responses that come slowly from looking at the light boxes.

Here, also, we see one graphic abridgment after another of iconic photographs: Philippe Halsman's nearly nude Marilyn Monroe, a self-portrait by the young Richard Avedon, a Weegee crime scene shot, Annie Leibovitz's picture of the naked John Lennon embracing the clothed Yoko Ono, August Sander's double portrait of Weimar bohemians, and on and on.

One watches the "Remix" with a growing unease that has several sources. First, it confirms what a mass of images we all internalize without conscious memory of them. How much of our understanding of the world do we owe to these seemingly depthless traces?

Next dawns the thought that Ezawa has found just the degree of visual definition -- strikingly low -- that corresponds to our mental recall of pictures seen.

The film piece "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" (2005) brings a third point dramatically into focus. It replays endlessly two presidential assassinations: the shooting of Abraham Lincoln as re-enacted in D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" and the shooting of John F. Kennedy as recorded in the famous Zapruder film.

By his signature graphic streamlining Ezawa shows how cinematic media can equate two disparate accounts of categorically parallel events and how watching them repeatedly can induce -- or expose -- in us a kind of fatalism that keeps our real feelings from us.

'Western Landscapes' at 16: An artist seldom makes a statement as helpful to viewers as this one by Rudy VanderLans: "All art finds its common quality in the halftone dots that reproduce it."

VanderLans argues the point in "13 Big Western Landscapes" at Gallery 16. From 20 feet away each of these pigment prints on canvas presents itself as a pedestrian black and white photograph of the California desert, rather like something off the floor of Lee Friedlander's darkroom.

Draw closer and the image breaks down into half-tone dots until, at a foot or two away, it dissolves into post-Lichtenstein abstraction.

VanderLans treats his photographic subject matter as a device for exposing the matter of art as he understands it: the information that survives reproduction or even gets intensified by it.

As he acknowledges, Roy Lichtenstein and John Baldessari have preceded him in this vein. But unlike them, VanderLans seems to want to steer our attention to a novel focal plane midway between consumption and analysis.