

The work of response: Material Witness

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Kota Ezawa: *The Simpson Verdict*, 2002; DVD; photo courtesy Haines Gallery, San Francisco

On view at the Berkeley Art Museum through December 20th, *Material Witness* showcases work by Mona Hatoum, Francisco Goya, and Carrie Mae Weems, to name a few. All of the pieces are from the BAM's permanent collection.

Given the recent protest at Berkeley on Thursday, September 24th concerning tuition increases and teacher lay-offs, it's important to remember that Berkeley has a long-standing reputation of being a school

poised around informative, public activism. *Material Witness* is fitting to this campus in that sense, as the exhibit is a collection of reactionary pieces, showing us the power of art as a method of activism.

The subject matter of the work runs the gamut, from exhibiting social injustices such as in the work of Shirin Neshat in the *Women of Allah Series* to election commentaries in the work by Andy Warhol and Hans Haake to pieces of public memory and media obsession such as in the work by Kota Ezawa entitled, *The Simpson Trial*. Most of the work takes the stance of the observer, or the witness, artists exhibiting their findings to the viewer with a sense of journalistic duty. It becomes clear however, as with any political commentary, that these pieces of art do more than merely document what occurred, they are calling for action, a desperate plea asking for response.

Material Witness is presented in dialogue with two other exhibits currently on view. *Fernando Botero: The Abu Ghraib Series*, exploits the torture of the Abu Ghraib prison several years ago through a series of provocative paintings made in 2004 and 2005. These fifty-six works were given generously by the artist to the BAM and are on view until February 7th, 2010. *Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet*, is also presented in conjunction with *Material Witness*. For more information and images from this exhibition, please visit artistsrespond.org.