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OSCARS 2005

That Question Again

Luke Jaeger · February 6, 2005 | "Isn't it all done by computers nowadays?"

Animators hear That Question far too much, and we largely have Pixar to thank. Just as Walt Disney succeeded in branding cel animation in the 1930s, to the extent that audiences worldwide still identify Disney as its quintessential (if not only) practitioner, so Pixar has endeavoured to "own" computer animation. If Pixar has accomplished this goal, it is due in large part to the films' commercial success—which has all too often come at the expense of artistic merit. For all of Pixar's innovation and experimentation in the technicalities of production, the content of the films has been rather slack. The software algorithms might be state of the art, but Pixar's characters, situations and plots too often fall back on the most shopworn Disneyesque clichés.

It's understandable. Pixar's goal all along was to develop and control the vocabulary of computer animation; that many of the films treated story and design as afterthoughts is beside the point. Hampered at first by primitive modelling and rendering technology, Pixar animators worked with simple, hard-edged, mechanical characters: unicycle, desk lamp, wind-up toy. These choices were significant, not just because their simplicity accelerated the animators' learning process (thereby stimulating the need for more powerful software tools), but also because of what they tell us of Pixar's collective self-image and its source, the social milieu from which Pixar arose. Silicon Valley in the 1980s was a dreary, culturally empty, endless suburb, nobody's idea of a magnet for artistic excellence. If many of Pixar's early characters were cheap consumer doodads and toys, objects without usefulness or "realness," it's only a reflection of the cultural blandness of the surroundings. An art form designed by computer geeks created plenty of space for its human practitioners to identify (sometimes too closely) with the machine and the machine-made object. It's hard to remember now that in its early days, Pixar had to overcome the widely-held belief that computer animation wasn't "authentic," even by the debased standards of the time (remember *My Little Pony*?). In a sorry repetition of animation's long struggle for recognition in the context of mainstream cinema, Pixar animators sat for too long at the children's table of animation, with nobody but their own characters for company.

Those who wait patiently for legitimacy to be bestowed on them never receive it. With *The Incredibles*, Pixar has finally kicked over the itty-bitty chairs and demanded a seat at the big table. According to the teleological theory of animation history first advanced by Disney (everything new is better, because progress is foreordained), this development was inevitable. *The Incredibles* is just the latest, most glorious

The Incredibles
Pixar Animation Studios, 2004
Directed by Brad Bird
115 minutes

chapter in a narrative of technological improvement—the evolutionary leap whose arrival was delayed only by the long wait for software tools capable of realistically rendering human figures and hair.

Such a view leaves out the element of human agency and trivializes the accomplishments of the real people who made the film. Director Brad Bird deserves credit for avoiding the obvious and the stereotypical at every opportunity (well, almost—surely someone could have given Violet a better motivation than just wanting a boyfriend). The writing is tight and the design is seamless. The color palettes, especially the grey-green wastelands of suburbs and office cubicles, are on par with the best of Disney or Miyazaki. The tensions which animate the story—between flatness and depth, past and present, explicit and implied—are represented visually in the opening sequence, which crisply lays out the backstory in faux home-movie footage, newsreels and newspaper images. The Kennedy-era cars and interiors are to die for, and for the comic-book fan there's more: empty urban plazas recalling the bold layouts of Jack Kirby, and delightful riffs about superhero costumes, "monologuing," and the unglamorous aspects of the superhero biz which the comics left out. The silver-age Marvel characters on which *The Incredibles* were based (most particularly the Fantastic Four, whose big-screen debut is sure to suffer by comparison) made a virtue of their foibles, weaknesses, and adult limitations; *The Incredibles* honours that tradition even while it conjures a simpler, imaginary comic-book past. It's a film by and about adults that neither sentimentalizes childhood nor brushes adult disappointments under the rug.

The Incredibles also takes That Question to a new level. *Tin Toy*, *Knick Knack*, and *Toy Story* masked the animator's insecurity behind the glossy sheen of plastic characters, deflecting attention from the crux of the matter: are we real artists or just kids playing with shiny toys? But *The Incredibles* tackles it face-on. The issues at hand—developing your talents versus fitting in, inborn greatness versus technological prowess, safety versus honesty—play themselves out not only in the narrative but in the circumstances of the film's production. Syndrome reveals that he's dedicated his life to developing technologies that will erase the distinction between the super and the non-super, thus stating in a nutshell the anxiety artists feel around technology. Does the animation come out of me, or do I just release it from the machinery by pressing buttons? Isn't it all done by computers nowadays? Ultimately, *The Incredibles* doesn't supply an answer. Instead, it gets you thinking about the question, as art is supposed to do.

Refreshingly free of snide pop-culture allusions and winking references to the offscreen personae of the voice actors, *The Incredibles* just might point the way forward for an animation industry mired in self-admiration and cynical show-biz corporatism. With Pixar having demonstrated the possibility of producing a commercially successful, artistically honest animated feature without these tiresome intrusions, dare we dream that the rest of the Hollywood herd will follow suit? Technology is cool, but artistic vision, snappy writing and tight design still matter. It's no accident that Bird gives Disney veterans Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston the last word, voicing the two old men who admonish the audience to remember the "old school." Let's hope somebody was listening.

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OSCARS 2004

If Animators Were In Charge, Triplets of Belleville Would Win Every Oscar There Is (But We Aren't, So It Won't)

Luke Jaeger · February 15, 2004 | The contortions of film reviewers attempting to describe Sylvain Chomet's *Triplets of Belleville* were nearly as dizzyingly surreal as the film itself. Some could manage nothing more articulate than, "It's not Disney. It's not anime. What is it?"

What it is, folks, is animation, a genre that from its earliest manifestations has been about transformation, synthesis, the collision of physical reality and dream world. Specifically, *Triplets* is one of the few successful translations of European-style, short form animation to feature length. Yes, those who navigate the world of animation using American and Japanese major-studio output as coordinates must have considered *Triplets* pretty far off the edge of the map. Aficionados of Svankmajer, Fleischer, and Winsor McCay, however, felt as if we had been miraculously rescued after an eternity adrift in the ocean.

That ocean, incidentally, is beautifully rendered using all the latest CG technology and populated by lots of cute turtles, stingrays, and clownfish whose fears and hopes (wouldn't you just know it?) are startlingly identical to those of normative American suburban families. I'm no gambling man, but my Oscar money is on *Finding Nemo*. If *Nemo*'s box office is any indicator, its message—that "human" (read: American) values can flourish in the inhospitable, alien world under the sea; that harmonious cross-species cooperation is inevitable if we can just show everyone how well-meaning we are—must be irresistibly comforting for Americans struggling with the realization that much of the human race currently views us as a planetary supervillain.

Which brings us back to *Triplets*, and another answer to that "what is it" question: It's boldly, proudly, unapologetically French. In our current political climate, that alone could jinx its chance to receive the American film establishment's highest blessing.

The Triplets of Belleville
Sony Pictures Classics, 2003
Directed by Sylvain Chomet
78 minutes

The imagery is French for sure: bicycles, frogs, accordions, Citroëns. But that's just surface, and *Triplets* is French to the core. Unlike so much other feature-length animation—certainly unlike *Nemo* and the other Oscar contender, Disney's *Brother Bear*—*Triplets* is utterly uncompromising. If you've ever embarrassed yourself speaking imperfect French to a Parisian, this Gallic attitude will be familiar.

Like the servile maitre d' in Belleville's nightclub, most Hollywood product is so desperate for public approval that it caters to your every prejudice and bad intellectual habit. But *Triplets* doesn't care if you like it or not. It has no dialogue, the title song sticks in your craw like a bad smell, all the characters

are ugly, and those who calculate a film's merit by dividing the ticket price into the running time are likely to feel cheated by an 80-minute feature. To these segments of the audience *Triplets* refuses to ingratiate itself. (One of the only exceptions to the film's general disdain for audience expectations is the final car chase scene, which feels forced).

Triplets comes with its own elaborate system of references, influences, and themes, all of them deeply (for want of a better word) animator-ish. Like the Fleischer Studio and Winsor McCay films he lovingly quotes, Chomet highlights his fascination with all things mechanical and transportational, and in so doing situates himself in a tradition dating back to pre-cinema. Bicycles, trains, cars and other things that go have been iconic images in cinema ever since the Lumière brothers filmed an approaching locomotive in 1896. Animation in particular shares a common genealogy with these 19th-century technologies; early animation was the province of eccentric tinkerers and bricoleurs like Muybridge, Otto Messmer, and Ladislas Starevicz. These people were motivated by a fascination with motion itself and what it's made of.

In *Triplets*, the bicycle becomes a beautiful metaphor for handmade animation: certainly not the fastest or easiest mode of transportation, but one with its own satisfactions, chief among them the sheer joy of motion brought into existence through the agency of one's own body. If traditional animators are cyclists, isn't animating a feature equivalent to riding the Tour de France? Lives there an animator who doesn't connect viscerally with Champion's indomitable urge to *just keep pedaling*?

When Champion and his long-suffering colleagues break through the wall of their prison and pedal their cumbersome contraption through open country, urged on by a clattering, ancient film projector, they're performing independent animation. No longer working for the entertainment (industry) of their evil overlords, the cyclist/animators are free to take their bizarre machine wherever it goes, with only the pure pleasure of the cinematic experience to lead them. This isn't a snide showbiz in-joke such as you'd find in Disney or *The Simpsons*, but a moment of gorgeous clarity: the movie knows it's a movie.

Triplets reminds us of the genuine pleasures and hardships of animated filmmaking. One hopes that Hollywood can stop frantically congratulating itself long enough to get the message. □

REGIONAL REVIEWS

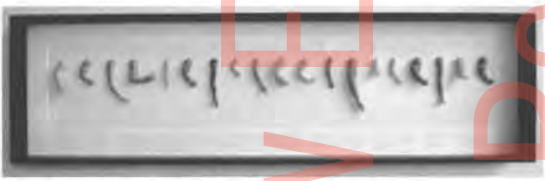
Massachusetts/New Hampshire

Hampden Gallery at Umass Amherst/Amherst, MA www.umass.edu/art

SALLY CURCIO: FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

Sally Curcio's new body of 2-D work combines minimalist rigor with sly humor. Curcio scavenges swizzle sticks, scratch-off lottery tickets, doll parts, multicolored milk jug caps, and other consumer miscellanea. Laid out in neat grid formations under glass, Curcio's assemblages of unremarkable objects speak to our need to collect, quantify, and categorize.

They also subvert that same organizing impulse: The pieces demonstrate the ultimate futility of trying to make things make sense. *Petite Prosthetic Sinistral* and *Petite Prosthetic Dextral*, two groups of doll arms (lefts and rights, respectively), are neatly lined up in order of—what? Not length, girth, color, or any other visual characteristic. Pudgy baby-doll arms, hypermuscled limbs of superheroes, and the noodle-thin arms of Barbies with their flipperlike, vestigial hands all mingle in egalitarian chaos. Are the doll arms sorted by Social Security number, zip code, mother's maiden name?



Sally Curcio, *Petite Prosthetic Dextral*, right doll arms on paper, 11 3/8 x 40 3/8", 2005. Photo: StudioBlank.net.

Curcio's pieces are puzzles, and their solvability or lack thereof points to our larger inability to grapple with consumerism's vast database of objects. What algorithm shall we bring to bear on Curcio's *National Geographic*? A line of *National Geographic* magazine spines, sawed from their pages and mounted to a panel, embodies Curcio's contradictions best. *National Geographic's* luscious visuals have inspired countless readers to obsessively save and organize back issues, which is precisely why they're worthless, as any tag sale shopper knows. If those old magazines have any value, it can only be measured by the visual pleasure a reader might derive from their pages, which Curcio has discarded from her piece. We're left with only a few words of text on the spines to tell us what we're not seeing.

The allusively titled *School Of Guns* presents an assortment of toy firearms, varying in scale from life-size to plastic-army-man-size. Arranged vertically with the largest on top, they imply a corporate hierarchy or perhaps a graphical representation of the American ideal of progress: The guy with the biggest gun rises to the top.

Luke Jaeger

Hampden Gallery at UMass Amherst

www.umass.edu/fac/hampden

DAVID HENDERSON: NEW WORK

C-5 cargo planes from nearby Westover Air Force Base, loaded with the fanciest instruments of death that America's top engineers can dream up, screech through the winter sky toward the Middle East. Down here on the ground, it's a propitious time to consider David Henderson's beautiful, ominous sculptures. Henderson's work goes down easy, but the contradictions and paradoxes it illuminates linger on.

The pieces, a richly allusive group of curvaceous forms, are a technical wow. Henderson used CAD software to design the forms and to plot their construction from flat materials like plywood and aluminum plate. The digital design is offset by the resolutely handmade assembly and finish, oozing with paint and glue drips, scrape marks, and the occasional crack. The wall-mounted pieces extend into the room and assert their three-dimensionality even as they reveal their construction from laminated strata of wood and metal.

But Henderson isn't just doing formalist calisthenics. Like the sky over Western Massachusetts (or anywhere, really), these pieces bristle with the barely disguised presence of American military power. The curves are the first thing you notice, rounded and swept and pointed. Shark's fin or fighter plane? Aboriginal canoe or rocket debris?

Henderson's titles probe the territory between the military-industrial and the pastoral. The show's largest piece is a bladelike 10-footer titled *Daisy Cutter*. A skirtlike shell of laminated carbon fiber is titled, simply, *Tamper*—as in an ancient gardening implement, or a poison-laced jar of Tylenol? The materials, too, speak of the history of war-driven manufacturing: Kevlar, carbon fiber, and epoxy (think flack jacket, F-15, space shuttle) appear alongside the more civilian plywood and spruce.

The distinction between swords and plowshares, Henderson suggests, is more ambiguous than we'd like to believe.

—*Luke Jaeger*

MASS MoCA/North Adams

www.massmoca.org

THE SLUGBEARERS OF KAYROL ISLAND, OR THE FRIENDS OF DOCTOR RUSHOWER: WORDS & DRAWINGS BY BEN KATCHOR, MUSIC BY MARK MULCAHY

JANUARY 18, 2003

That comic strip art derives much of its vocabulary from cinema is an oft-repeated truism. It seems equally true, however, that good comic artists don't necessarily make good directors.

Author/illustrator Ben Katchor's recent collaboration with composer Mark Mulcahy is a case in point. Katchor's story and script, loaded (occasionally to excess) with his familiar themes—late-industrial melancholy, crackpot utopianism, kneeslapper product names—is grafted to a conventional boy-meets-girl plot. It is not a good fit.

Mulcahy's music is versatile, veering between Joy Division eerie, Frank Zappa complex, and They Might Be Giants goofy, but it is too rich a mixture for Katchor's dry, understated texts and drawings. Their emotional resonance gets lost in transit. Nor is any help forthcoming from the staging—the cast, not all of whom appeared to be in costume, delivered their lines while standing mannequin-still in front of projected Katchor artwork. With the notable exception of leading man Ryan Tommire, who brought radiant stage presence to the role of Immanuel Lubang, an aficionado of kitchen appliance instruction pamphlets, the actors treated the evening as a recitation of songs rather than a theatrical performance.

The story concerns the idealistic Lubang's chance meeting with philanthropist Dr. Rushower, his romance with Rushower's daughter Gingin, and Lubang's efforts to bring the blessings of "consumer fiction" (those appliance pamphlets) to the oppressed workers of Kayrol Island, "the source of one-sixth of the world's cheap consumer goods." The trenchant critique of global capitalism this setup might lead one to expect never quite materializes (neither does an emotional bond between the audience and characters). The show's underlying philosophy is ultimately apolitical: when action is impossible, ignorance is preferable to knowledge. A newspaper tagline reads, "What you don't know can't hurt you," and one song contains the repeated line, "the less she [Gingin] knows, the better."

Some of the show's problems are structural, an inevitable part of the evolution of any theater piece. Act 1 takes place in Manhattan and is too long; Act 2, set on Kayrol Island, is too short. As one audience member remarked, in The *Rocky Horror Show* it took only two songs to get inside the castle, not two acts. But, some of the problems are conceptual and will take more than tinkering to fix. Reading Lubang as Katchor's stand-in, what are we to make of Lubang's disgust and disappointment when the Kayrol Islanders show no interest in his consumer fiction? Is Katchor bewailing his own reception by the insensitive boobs who comprise his audience?

The less this longtime admirer of Katchor's comic work knows about that, the better.

—*Luke Jaeger*

The Interventionists: User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life

Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, Eds.,
with Joseph Thompson, Nicholas Mirzoeff, and Ondine C. Chavoya

Cambridge: The MIT Press, 152 pages, 100 color illustrations, 2004. $25.00

The Interventionists, gallery view, first floor Mass MoCA. Courtesy of Mass MoCA.

A statistician once described an incredibly unlikely event by comparing it to "the odds that the wind blowing through a junkyard would cause a 747 to assemble itself." Like that mythical junkyard, Mass MoCA's *The Interventionists* may be short on structure, but it does contain lots of interesting and occasionally useful objects. If the breeze we kick up leafing through the 152-page *Users' Manual* isn't sufficient to spontaneously generate a flying machine, perhaps that's just as well in this age of diminished expectations and air travel paranoia.

Kryzsztof Wodizck, *Homeless Vehicle*, 1988–1989. Photo: Arjen Noordeman.

Equal parts *Steal This Book*, mail order catalog, and high school yearbook (with the kids quoting Deleuze and Debord instead of Pink Floyd and The Doors), *The Interventionists Users' Manual* presents the dozens of participating artists in a rigidly standardized fashion that is occasionally illuminating, often frustratingly opaque. Considering how much information it contains, the catalog's reliance on cookie-cutter methods of presentation is understandable. In most cases, each artist's work is crammed into a single two-page spread along with a confusing clutter of logos, arrows, stripes, Polka dots, and biographical boilerplate, leaving little room for all but the most cursory project description. Sometimes that's just fine; I doubt anyone's consciousness will be elevated by the God Bless Graffiti Coalition's assertion that "while many might view graffiti as vandalism, the Coalition argues that graffiti, like advertising, is simply a message delivery in public space." If a shortage of page space prompted the crowded layout, the catalog's tendentious interviews could have been worked over by an editorial Interventionist with a sharp red pencil. Most of these works were conceived as Situationist-inspired guerrilla art. In the Situationists' 1960s heyday, it may have been sufficient to identify the target as a monolithic "Establishment"— a vague term to be sure, but at least those who used it thought they knew what it meant. The environment in which today's Interventionists operate, however, is fragmented, mediated, decentered. The often violent confrontations of the 1960s took place in public, but in today's world of digital media we can shield ourselves almost entirely from seeing or hearing anything we disagree with. While the Interventionists may sometimes succeed in cutting through the layers of mediation and stimulating direct engagement, the highly mediated form in which the catalog presents the work (the book of the exhibition of the documentation of the work) runs counter to its spirit. In the catalog's foreword, Mass MoCA Director Joseph Thompson situates the exhibition in opposition to the "self-referential art of beauty, craft, abstract luster, and evocative detail" that rings today's art market cash registers. Yet on further inspection, the Interventionists' work has a lot in common with this genre. Much of it is about the small, issue-specific gesture: genetic engineering, homelessness, outsourcing. When the work aims for a larger target, it tends to come off as ideologically overloaded. Of the many artists represented, only a few find the sweet spot between preciousness and pomposity.

The Yes Men art collective succeeds in this difficult balancing act by leavening the starchy Situationist recipe with a generous scoop of those classic surrealist ingredients: humor and weirdness. Practitioners of graffiti and street poster art preach to an audience of the already converted—the less sympathetic you are to this mode of communication, the more likely you'll regard it as yet another mess to avoid stepping in on your way to work—and thus deprive themselves of the opportunity to confront their targets face-on. High government officials and Fortune 500 CEOs don't hang around sidewalks and bus shelters. Rather than raging at this immutable fact, the Yes Men insert themselves into the government conferences, industry conventions, and online environments where the powerful really congregate. In 1999, the collective created a bogus World Trade Organization Web site (www.gatt.org), which fooled more than a few visitors—including one very confused government official from Gibraltar, whose Pythonesque e-mail exchanges with the Yes Men (in the guise of the fictitious "Granwyth Hulatberi-Hulatberi-Smith") are reproduced in the catalog to hilarious effect.

William Pope.L, *Black Factory*, 2003. Photo: Arjen Nordeman.

This Web-based stunt soon snowballed into speaking invitations from business convention planners who were not in on the joke. Seizing one such opportunity, Yes Men member Andy Bichlbaum transformed a 2001 textile industry conference in Finland into a platform for a prank of baroque proportions. Disguised as a clean-cut white male WTO representative, Bichlbaum launched into a deadpan PowerPoint presentation in which he claimed, among other things, that the American Civil War was a "useless exercise in freedom" since market forces would have eventually replaced slavery with today's global sweatshop economy. For the grand finale, Bichlbaum tore off his specially constructed breakaway business suit to reveal a gleaming gold superhero outfit sporting a 3-foot-long inflatable phallus with an onboard electronic system ostensibly allowing the wearer to remotely monitor and deliver electric shocks to lazy workers. The prank was seamless enough to fool one anti-WTO protester into hurling a pie into Bichlbaum's face afterward. It's hard to imagine Guy Debord's earnest acolytes concocting something so deliciously bizarre. Much of the ancillary literature in the catalog presents a rather gauzy view of the 1960s counterculture. In his introductory essay, curator Nato Thompson invokes the spirit of Abbie Hoffman's political prank artistry and correctly notes that a sense of humor was not the Situationists' strong suit. But this glosses over the depth of suspicion with which Hoffman's Yippies and the New Left regarded each other. Hoffman, after all, was an all-American boy whose influences ran

(continued on page 55)

Luke Jaeger is a freelance writer who lives in Northampton, MA.

Books: The Interventionists (continued from page 7)

more to Lenny Bruce and the Marx brothers than to political theorists. One could make a case for the Yes Men's faux Web sites as examples of Situationist "detournement"—the subversive repurposing of officially sanctioned visual symbols—but the gold suit stunt is pure Yippie.

William Pope.L, another artist who's not shy about appearing in public with an outsized dildonic prosthesis (he once strolled the length of 125th Street, Harlem's main commercial drag, with a wheeled, 12-foot cardboard pipe issuing from his fly), weighs in with the conceptually dense and physically imposing Black Factory project. From a panel truck parked outside the museum, a tangle of cables and ducts snakes through an upper-story window and connects to a large inflatable igloo inside the gallery. Museum visitors are encouraged to bring "objects that speak to them of blackness" (Pope.L deliberately leaves interpretation up to the individual). Some of these objects are photographed and returned to the owners; some are exhibited in the inflatable igloo; still others are ground into dust and packaged in spice jars labeled 'Blackness' or molded into new cultural detritus such as prayer mats, blank books, and rubber duckies. Pope.L further complicates the project by surrounding it with tongue-in-cheek corporate PR-speak ("At the Black Factory, we make Opportunity—the opportunity to have the Blackness you've always longed for"). It's heady and theoretically loaded, but the spirit in which Pope.L implicates the visitor is playful, not didactic. Whatever definition of blackness emerges from the ever-shifting collection of objects necessarily derives from the community itself, not from any preconceived idea the artist wishes to hammer home. The Black Factory satirizes the emptiness of consumerism and its language while using that very language to explore complex and ideologically loaded ideas. It's also laugh-out-loud funny. Pope.L pulls off this virtuosic achievement by precisely attending to those qualities that got such a bad rap in the foreword: beauty, craft, and evocative detail.

Art, it turns out, is good for more than just conveying information. Some of us suspected as much all along.

Luke Jaeger

Mass MOCA/North Adams, MA www.massmoca.org

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE: 9 DRAWINGS FOR PROJECTION, WITH LIVE MUSIC COMPOSED AND CONDUCTED BY PHILIP MILLER

William Kentridge, *Nine Drawings for Projection.*

South African artist William Kentridge makes animated films by drawing, erasing, and redrawing images on an oversize sheet of paper, filming the drawing's evolution in stop motion. That this practice makes him unique among contemporary, internationally known artists says less about his technique, which is stellar, than it does about the amnesia with which the fine art world regards animation. Kentridge's ties to early animation and cinema are evident in the program's first film, *Journey To The Moon* (2003). The other nine thematically linked films form a loose narrative about a love triangle in present-day Johannesburg. Kentridge tells the story elliptically, treading the line between representation and abstraction.

Compressed into about an hour of screen time is fourteen years' worth of work, and they were no ordinary fourteen years in South Africa's history. The transition from apartheid to democracy is represented obliquely: Crowds of teeming workers coalesce and fill the screen; underground miners are shown literally under the feet of their expensively suited, overfed boss; corpses transform into natural land forms that a clear-eyed black woman maps with surveying instruments. Though her appearance is brief, the future clearly belongs to her, not the self-absorbed central characters.

Kentridge's South Africa is a place where past, present, and future overlap and color each other. The drawings are also poised between history and potential; every walking figure or wind-blown newspaper leaves a trail of erasure behind. Though Kentridge provides no bumper-sticker-ready recipe for how this is to be achieved, the evening's first musical number provides a clue. Composed to celebrate the establishment of The Constitutional Court of South Africa, the song's lyrics were taken from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's opening speech to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The song's title, "Tswarelo," means "forgiveness."

Luke Jaeger

BARBARA SINGER AWARD: VIVIAN PRATT/MICHAEL MULLANEY

Vivian Pratt's work brings to mind Muhammad Ali's motto "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." Pratt's large photographic images of decaying flowers are digitally tweaked into subdued, stately ruminations on aging and the body's decline.

From a distance, the colors are muted; up close, they reveal multicolored digital noise, like pointillist brush strokes. Printed on vellum and suspended a few inches in front of the wall by steel pins, the images seem to glow and float in midair. At the same time, the artist's choice of mounting hardware speaks as eloquently as her subject matter. Her work has often featured images or subjects from the world of medical technology, in which the cold and clinical machine encounters the living, flawed body; this interplay is also mirrored by Pratt's own history as a professional technologist turned artist. Pratt's flowers hang like butterflies pinned in a museum case: The same technological intervention that kills them also allows us to continue seeing them.

Vivian Pratt, *Untitled 8 (Fragile Environment),* computer generated limited-edition pigment inkjet print on vellum.

If Pratt's work floats above the fray, Michael Mullaney's wades in with tools at the ready. These works on paper are piled thick with paint and then scratched with a welter of pencil marks in repeating geometric shapes. Circles and squares fight their way to the surface as if struggling to cut through the fog of abstraction and represent something. The resulting tension (as well as the predominantly white-and-gray color scheme) recalls the work of Philip Guston, whom Mullaney's statement mentions as a source of inspiration. Mullaney's process also derives from surrealist automatic drawing. But Mullaney doesn't want to ventilate his subconscious so much as map it. It's the Information Age version of the surrealist project: Memory and consciousness are treated as data to be organized by means of the drawing process. *Luke Jaeger*

University Gallery at UMass Amherst/Amherst

www.fineartscenter.com

PRIVATE EYES: IMAGE AND IDENTITY

The five artists in *Private Eyes* wrestle with identity, but let's be clear: It's the definition of identity you learned in elementary school, not graduate school. And that's good. At a moment when the word tends to make the viewer brace for an icy plunge into the esthetics of race and gender, *Private Eyes* soars above the ideological battlefield to present broadly humanistic, personal work about what makes us us.

Derek Jarman's *Blue* (one of the few films that you can watch with your eyes closed) is meandering and masterful. *Lapsus*, a dream-themed and dreamlike installation by Miri Segal, consists of a short, looped video viewed through a fish-eye lens set into a wall; it's a bit like watching an inscrutable performance unfold through an apartment door peephole. *1:10*, by Karin Sander, a trio of tiny scale–replicas of human models generated with 3-D scanning and extrusion technology used in industrial design prototyping. It presents the human form as an eerily photorealistic action figure, digital artifacts and all. If you ever suspected as a child that your television contained tiny people, these Barbie-size figures will make immediate and perfect sense.

But the still photographs by Barbara Ess and Ann Hamilton steal the show from the technological whizbangery. Ess shows a series of beautiful, large C-prints made from pinhole camera negatives; with their blurred subjects and richly rendered backgrounds, they are like portraits—but the exact opposite. Hamilton's *Face to Face* photographs, shot using a mouth-cam, are breathtakingly uncanny and hysterically funny. Hamilton has also mounted her photographs to resemble cartoonish, iconic faces: Art that stares back.

—Luke Jaeger

Art Interactive/Cambridge

www.artinteractive.org

TIME SHARE

The inaugural exhibit at Art Interactive packs a lot of ideas and more than a few gorgeous objects into a modest amount of square footage.

Time Share is a group show organized around "time, perception, and interactivity." Don't think too hard about the tagline (isn't all art about perception?). The show could just as well be subtitled "Art That Makes You Say, 'Oh, Cool!'" That said, if interactive art exhibits usually remind you of video arcades, don't worry. *Time Share* inspires quiet contemplation along with the flash.

Two standout pieces, Camille Utterback's *Liquid Time—Tokyo* and Scott Snibbe's *Shadow*, incorporate the viewer's physical presence into projected images. Accessible and fun, both pieces also reward sustained attention. Snibbe captures the viewer's shadow and reprojects it as a ghost of the viewer's now-absent body. Utterback's hypnotic piece is the showstopper—a projected digital slide show that ripples into motion when the viewer moves past. Walking crowds suddenly sprout from empty urban spaces, shimmer in metallic vertical slices, and then recede into stillness as the viewer moves on.

Michael Mittelman complicates interactivity with *Fathers*, the show's least overtly technological and most ambiguous piece. Mittelman has outfitted a lounge chair with speakers and a projector; sitting in the chair triggers sound, video, and the smell of frying bacon (!). The Holocaust-themed video is almost impossible to see from the sitting position. Is *Fathers* a comment on memory's unreliability, Jewish assimilation, or a Christian Boltanski–style prank? Mittelman would rather raise questions than answer them. He deserves notice for being the only artist in the bunch to tackle the olfactory element.

Jeff Talman's *Distance of the Discreet Voyeur*, an assemblage of acoustic instruments resonating through speakers, lends delirious background music to the exhibit, interacting not with the viewer but with the other pieces in the show.

—Luke Jaeger

Williams College Museum of Art/Williamstown, MA www.wcma.org

DAVID ROKEBY: TAKEN

The fertile territory at the intersection of art and surveillance is hot real estate these days. David Rokeby stakes his claim with *Taken*, an installation at Williams College.

Three screens occupy the gallery's walls. The first, a ten-foot-by-ten-foot grid, alternates projections of previous visitors' faces with close-up surveillance shots of current visitors', each labeled with an adjective such as "resigned," "reassured," "unthreatened." Rokeby's miraculous custom software picks out a visitor's face and follows it around the room—a white square appears on the screen tracking its progress—and though one's rational mind knows these adjectives are assigned at random, a moment of panic ensues: If contemporary surveillance technology can recognize your face, can it also tell how you feel?

David Rokeby, *Taken*, installation. Courtesy of the artist.

On a second screen, visitors' images scroll continuously upward through a flux of shifting gray shapes. Movement is detected by a camera and mapped into this stream. When standing still, one's image disappears—a discovery that is at once liberating and terrifying. Is a Unabomber–like retreat into isolation and nonexistence the only alternative to having every movement monitored?

The third screen gives a hint of an escape route. Here one can see one's own image overlaid, like a photographic exposure, with those of everyone else who has walked through the gallery. Alone in the space, the visitor shares the virtual space on the screen with the specters of previous visitors who mill about in a dense, semitransparent jumble of bodies. Your first instinct is to wave your arms or jump around in order to pick your own image out of the crowd—but that's what all the previous visitors did, too.

A roomful of ghosts waving their arms, silently clamoring for recognition before the automated eye of the surveillance apparatus: a metaphor of the artist's role in a paranoid and security-obsessed society. *Luke Jaeger*

SELF-SUFFICIENT

Self-Sufficient is billed as a "site/non-site venture," not an exhibition. There's a reason for this semantic footwork. Curator Barbara O'Brien designed the show specifically to highlight work that has a siteless component even as its material sits in the Cambridge Arts Council's pristine white-walled gallery.

A diverse group of artists with widely varying esthetic concerns share an imperative to question not just traditional modes of gallery exhibition but also the conventional assumptions of public art—a phrase that has on too many occasions been synonymous with large, ugly sculptures designed and sited by committee without regard for the reactions of the public who are its supposed beneficiaries. Art collective BBS (Jesse Bercowetz, Matt Bua, and Ward Shelley) tackle this corporate brutalism head-on with *Truck Drawing 2*, an installation based on an earlier performance in which the artists attached drawing implements to a truck and drove around marking streets and other public surfaces. A Frankenstein cluster of battered TVs hanging from the ceiling plays road videos of the art truck (some of the video is almost impossible to make out, but that's what you get with scavenged equipment). Fractured relics of the drawing exercise protrude from the assemblage, along with shards of an iMac that we last saw being dragged to its doom behind the speeding truck. Performance art or garden-variety suburban vandalism?

BBS, *Truck Drawing 2*, video, mixed media, 2004.

Leave that for the neighbors to decide and stick your head inside one of Vaughn Bell's *Personal Biospheres*. These simple Plexiglas hemispheres with live plants growing around the bottom shelf inhabit a sonic and olfactory space far removed from the world of driving fast and breaking stuff. The *Personal Biospheres* provide a wry comment on the privatization of the natural world while soothing the user with the moist smell of a miniature greenhouse. *Luke Jaeger*

Mass MOCA/North Adams, MA www.massmoca.org

BASIL TWIST: SLEEPING BEAUTY OF THE WOODS

Mass Manufacturing, the work-in-progress performance series held occasionally at Mass MoCA, presents theater in the rough. Generally, pieces are in the workshop phase, that part of the staging process in which the director's decisions are tested before a live audience. This is where the rubber meets the road, an opportunity to close the gap between what the performers intend and what the audience experiences. Instead of a seamless and polished theatrical product, the audience gets a glimpse at the bones of a show before the finish is applied.

From Basil Twist's *La Bella Dormente nel Bosco*. Photo: Bobby Miller.

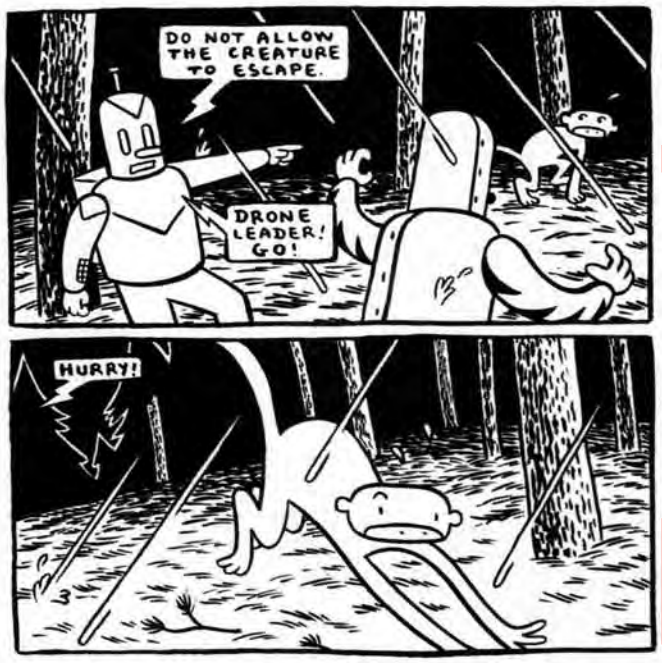
In the case of *Sleeping Beauty*, those bones turn out to be made of corrugated cardboard—lots of it—as well as liberal quantities of duct tape, scrap lumber, fabric remnants, and old newspaper. Basil Twist's restaging of the 1922 Respighi opera will feature dozens of human-size puppets, unclothed and partially fabricated, to provide a fascinating look at the mechanics of these performing objects.

Most of the puppets, especially those in the first and third acts, are string marionettes whose movements have a lyrical, stately, old-world quality. In the second act, these are replaced by modern direct-manipulation puppets, operated by a puppeteer standing on the stage in plain sight instead of above it. For Twist, a third-generation puppeteer, this staging decision recapitulates the history of his centuries-old and still-evolving art form: The cumbersome and tangle-prone string marionettes give way to more contemporary puppets, then, later still, the marionettes return. Inspired by the princess who slept for centuries before being awakened by a kiss, Twist hopes his own love for the rich history of puppetry will bring it to life for modern audiences. Asked what the story of *Sleeping Beauty* means to him, Twist remarked, "Sometimes you have to wait 300 years for things to change."

Luke Jaeger

Luke Jaeger

Comic Art in the Green Mountains



James Kochalka, *Monkey Vs. Robot: Crystal of Power*, 2002.

In the thirteen years since Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize for his Holocaust-themed graphic novel *Maus*, the once-maligned comic strip has continued to inch ever closer to widespread critical respectability. A significant step in that ongoing progression was the establishment of The Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont. The CCS, a training ground for comic artists with an emphasis on the nonmainstream, is run by Burlington's James Sturm, author of another acclaimed Jewish-themed graphic novel, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*.

One might well wonder what a hotbed of comic creation is doing in such a remote spot. In fact, Vermont has been home to a number of notable comic artists, five of whom were included in a recent group exhibition at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center. In addition to Sturm, these included longtime collaborators Stephen Bissette and Rick Veitch, Frank Miller (creator of *Sin City*, from which the recent movie of the same name was adapted), and James Kochalka.

Kochalka is an idiosyncratic do-it-yourselfer whose simplified drawing style sits somewhere between *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening and the omnipresent painter/illustrator Gary Baseman. (Under the name James Kochalka Superstar, he also writes and performs strange rock songs with titles like *Show Respect for Michael Jackson*). His longest-running project, a few pages of which are represented in the Brattleboro show, is *The Sketchbook Diaries*—one square, four-panel comic strip for every day of the last seven years, and counting. These small and intimate snapshots chronicle the details of Kochalka's daily life as artist, musician, husband, and father. From the constraints of the self-imposed discipline of daily production, the four-panel formula, and the economy of Kochalka's drawings emerge a rich and varied autobiography. Veitch, a comic industry veteran, used to work for mainstream heavyweight DC, where he put in a stint drawing *Superman* in the mid-1980s before beginning his tenure on *Swamp Thing*. Veitch took *Swamp Thing* to places its original creators probably never imagined; what started as a B-list title about a stinky monster formed by an amok science experiment became an arena in which Veitch could explore his interest in the nature of consciousness itself. In 1989, Veitch (by now handling writing duties as well) posited a time-traveling Swamp Thing facilitating the crucifixion of Jesus; DC, fearing an Andres Serrano-style eruption, withheld publication. In protest, Veitch not only quit DC but bailed out of mainstream comics altogether, hauled himself back to Vermont, and started self-publishing a giddily surreal dream journal in comic book form.

True to his industry roots, Veitch draws in an understated yet virtuosic old-school style. If Kochalka's drawings recall the clean and simple shapes of linocuts, Veitch's inkwork is steelpoint etching. The delicate hatching, stately brushwork, and confident placement of solid black areas all recall the look of classic comics from the "Silver Age" of the 1960s. And Veitch is no nine-to-fiver: He doesn't just draw comics, he lives them and dreams them. The pages of his twenty-one-issue dream comic *Rare Bit Fiends* are peopled with Veitch's fellow artists, past and present. (Superman and Bob Dylan are also frequent guests). Inside jokes abound. Veitch, a master mimic, likes to draw his comic-biz colleagues in their own style whenever possible. The series title itself is a reference to Winsor McCay, the early twentieth-century animator and illustrator, whose riotously colored, proto-surreal *Dreams Of The Rare Bit Fiend* comics blew unsuspecting American minds with every Sunday supplement.

The "underground" comic artists of the 1960s and '70s made a conscious effort to discard much of the conventional visual language of the genre; new themes and experiences demanded new forms as well. If there was a growing sense that the official narrative of America was undergoing a breakdown, then a rupture of comic-book narrativity was as inevitable as the dawn. (The drugs probably helped too). There followed a fertile period of graphical experimentation in the comic medium, in the course of which the range of allowable style and content was blown wide open. But Veitch closes the loop, sticking earnestly to the classic comic look he knows and loves best, even as his dream-inspired content spirals into fragmented realms of nonlinear weirdness. The subject matter may be dark or mysterious, but all of Veitch's post-DC work exudes a deadpan humor. Anyone who grew up with the vocabulary of mainstream comics—an amalgamation of the fantastical and Baroque with the stilted and pompous—has to smile watching Veitch appropriate that commercialized graphical style for his own highly specific, inside-of-the-brainpan explorations. ■

Rick Veitch, *Rare Bit Fiends #2*, page 18, pen and ink on Bristol board.

Center for Cartoon Studies – www.cartoonstudies.org
Brattleboro Museum and Art Center – www.brattleboromuseum.org

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Luke Jaeger is a freelance writer who lives in Northampton, MA.

Mills Gallery at the Boston Center for the Arts/Boston, MA
www.bcaonline.org

WHAT IF?

The six artists in this group show tackle an interesting curatorial proposition: Since we know that an artwork's meaning is contingent upon external factors beyond the artist's control, why not assemble an exhibition that celebrates instead of suppresses that contingency? Midway through the show's run, the artists in *What If?* intervened in each other's work, here covering up one of Peter Lindenmuth's exquisitely shaped plywood furniture modules with a cheap camouflage-patterned rain poncho, there adding an empty pair of shoes or a miniature camera to an installation. Later, another round of interventions was scheduled in response to viewers' ideas retrieved from the gallery's suggestion box.

The implementation of this mouth-watering concept, unfortunately, was timid. Perhaps that's inevitable given the show's unresolved contradiction: Is its thesis better served by work that is intentionally amenable to reconfiguration or by modernistic, discrete pieces that tend to resist such meddling? While one approach makes for a livelier gallery experience, the other has superior theoretical firepower. Curator Mary Sherman splits the difference.

Sherman's own pieces in *What If?* (a motorized installation with martini glasses and the music of Spike Jones's *Cocktails For Two* as well as a set of paintings that slide around on tracks) fall into the former category. Kelly Kaczynski's *Under Mountain* is a beautifully wrought geological form with lights and fingernail-size paper deer inside; Larimer Richards, whose four interrelated mixed media pieces speak of the loneliness of American car culture, stuck a tiny camera inside, projected the video onto the piece's surface, and moved the whole aggregation to the floor, where its subtle interior charms were accessible only to viewers who got down on their hands and knees.

In most cases, the interventions are only dramatic enough to make the viewer wish to see the pieces without them. *What If?* proves that devalorizing artistic intent works—when the artist intends it. *Luke Jaeger*

Mary Sherman, *At Heart, Spike Jones* (detail), oil on wood, aluminum, plastic and motors, 2002–2003. Photo: Stephen Vedder.

New Art Center in Newton

www.newartcenter.org

THE BALLAD OF WIRES AND HANDS

The Ballad of Wires and Hands may be the most impressive display of human handiwork engineered to inspire awe and contemplation ever gathered under the roof of the New Art Center—even during the building's previous incarnation as a church.

The eleven artists in the show probe the increasingly porous boundary between the mechanical and the biological. If that sounds like a recipe for a dry, technical show, it isn't. Curator Dana Moser fills the space with an assortment of kinetic, interactive, electronic, and machine art that's both deep and wide. It is an esthetic generous enough to encompass the exquisitely hand-wrought as well as the dumpster-dived, and it carries an emotional range one rarely sees in a genre that too often strives merely to impress with its coolness.

The stately and gracefully articulated steel arms of A. M. Lilly's *Couple* translate the gestures of a tiny electric motor into swooping, sweeping arcs whose shadows and reflections reverberate in the high-ceiling space. Kinetic maestro Arthur Ganson weighs in with pieces ranging from the delicate clockwork of *Machine with Small Chair and Rock* to the inexorable *Radio Press*, whose imperceptibly slow-moving steel plates crushed a captive plastic radio to smithereens over the course of a month. Christy Georg's *Attainment*, a mechanized spinning wine glass that slowly fills with water, approaching but never quite reaching the pitch of a nearby tuning fork, gives off intermittent, melancholy music. There is humor, too, particularly in David Webber's *UNTITLED (superfantasticrobotvoodoopower)*, which resembles the illicit progeny of a mobile DJ setup, a high-school science lab, and the home appliance section of a thrift shop.

Webber's tongue-in-cheek installation places houseplants on spinning phonograph turntables. Live video of the revolving flora is fed to a synthesizer to produce stochastic music; the resulting racket is piped back to the plants. Whether the plants find their own music more nutritious than Mozart will undoubtedly be a subject for pseudo-botanists of the future.

—Luke Jaeger

Luke Jaeger

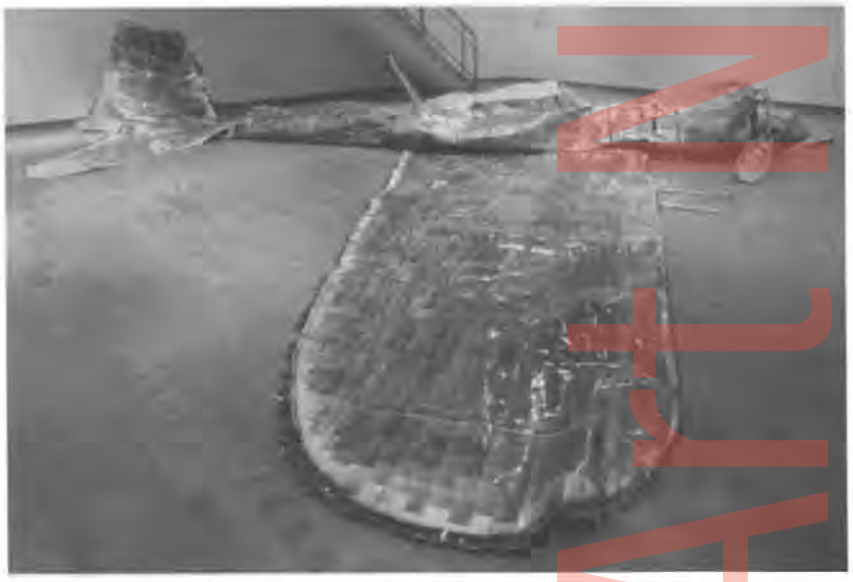
The Zero Project

In the seventy-five years since Alexander Calder built his *Circus*, the act of enlisting one's childhood toys into adult artistic practice has become commonplace. From Zbigniew Libera's LEGO™ concentration camp to myriad undergraduate sculpture projects executed with hideously mutilated dolls, the subverting-the-toys meme has achieved widespread market penetration. Like any cliché, it replicates in miniature a series of simplistic propositions: The world is corrupt; evil adults keep children ignorant; toys are the instruments of this deception.

Against this background, Katshushige Nakahashi's *Zero Project* is refreshingly complex. His subject and medium is the Japanese Zero fighter aircraft. Depending on whether one is old enough to remember the Second World War, the Zero represents the centerpiece of either the deadly Japanese Imperial Air Force or one's childhood collection of plastic scale model kits.

Nakahasi, born in 1955, is the son of an airplane mechanic whose wartime duty was to prepare aircraft for suicide pilots. "He saw innumerable pilots off on their suicide missions," Nakahashi told an interviewer. "Many times he faced death in the sweeping machine-gun fire of attacking Grummans. What must he have been thinking as he watched me build my model planes? In the age when dying for your country was a matter of course, shameful pilots who returned from their suicide missions due to mechanical failings of their aircraft were greeted with suspicions of cowardice. I imagine my father, who was in charge of airplane maintenance, must have experienced mixed feelings regarding his responsibility to duty and the safe return of these pilots."

For each *Zero Project* installation, Nakahashi assembles a plastic model Zero and painstakingly photographs every square millimeter of its surface in macro close-up. Each photograph captures an area about half the size of a grain of rice. The thousands of resulting images are printed at a consumer-grade photo lab, then Scotch-taped together by a platoon of local volunteers into a floppy replica of the full-size plane. Each Zero is gallery specific; at the exhibition's end, Nakahashi ceremonially burns the airplane in an open field. At the Smith College Museum of Art, Nakahashi used the gallery layout to advantage. The airplane appears to sag into the gallery floor; we first glimpse it from above, via a balcony just off the admission area. The initial impression is that a real Zero has somehow crashed into the basement gallery. More than a few visitors craned their necks up, looking for a jagged hole in the museum's roof. Halfway down the stairs, as the individual photographic components become visible, what looked at first like a half-deflated Claes Oldenberg now resembles a three-dimensional David Hockney montage. Close inspection reveals the richly detailed textures captured by the camera: intricate traceries of scratches and pockmarks resembling weather-beaten, corroded metal. Finally, we discover not a real plane wreck that spent decades exposed to the elements but a plastic model photographed at extreme magnification. Where the naked eye sees smoothly polished plastic, the camera reveals a landscape of countless scars and imperfections.



Nakahashi Katsushige, *Phantom Zero*, installation view, mixed media, 2004. Photo: Stephen Petegorsky.

Nakahashi Katsushige, *Phantom Zero*, installation view, mixed media, 2004. Photo: Stephen Petegorsky.

Nakahashi's multilayered presentation takes us on a journey through scale: The closer we get to the Zero, the smaller we understand it to be. If we could get infinitely close to it, would it become infinitely small—like the number zero itself? This conundrum is mirrored in the interplay of scale between the harmless toy plane and the deadly real one. But instead of milking the juxtaposition of plaything and weapon for shopworn irony, Nakahashi builds a more nuanced landscape in which the basic sculptural elements of material and scale invoke a confusing world of shifting contexts. As with aerial photos of war devoid of human-scale perspective, our experience becomes fractured as we approach. By using the camera to see closer, Nakahashi conjures the real killing machine signified by the toy. What seem to exist at opposite ends of a scale—the meditative child's scale model and the fearsome killing machine—are looped into a continuum.

Nakahashi's multilayered presentation takes us on a journey through scale: The closer we get to the Zero, the smaller we understand it to be.

Our journey is also through time. The perception of a genuine, old, wrecked plane—an artifact from world history—gives way to that of a representation, a toy, a personal possession. We end up at the intersection of the personal and the political, the controllable and the uncontrollable, the handmade and the manufactured (the plastic model kit, after all, is where lots of artists first learned the skills of fabrication and assembly). Also inhabiting the piece are the many and contradictory personae of Japanese society: the Japan that valued honor and duty so highly that ritual suicide was institutionalized as a military tactic; the vicious Japanese military; the de-clawed postwar Japan focusing its rigor and discipline on peacetime consumerism; the manufacturer of precision optics and cheap plastic doodads. All these ghosts of Japan's wartime history and its aftermath slumber within the piece.

Nor can any honest discussion of postwar Japan's economic "miracle" omit its hefty environmental costs. Japan has hosted some of history's worst ecological disasters; this is, after all, the country that made "mercury poisoning" a household phrase. Nakahashi makes his concern with ecology explicit in the decision to burn each Zero at the end of its gallery run: "The work is completed only at the point when it is reduced to ashes, but when the ashes are taken up by the wind, and the scorched grass begins to regrow, these processes are also all part of the art." Incineration not only takes the piece itself "back to zero" but also speaks of Japanese funeral traditions, of the final disposition of consumer society's garbage, of the gruesome deaths inflicted by and upon the real Zero pilots and their latter-day descendants, of the countless civilians burned alive by American incendiary bombing. No Burning Man rave theatrics at this incineration ceremony; the mood here is solemn, introspective, funereal.

One's complicity in war begins with the unwillingness to look beyond the immediate consequences of one's actions. Is obsessively building an art object whose destruction is preordained any crazier than constructing real flying machines for suicide pilots? When a society's priorities are scrambled, is war the ultimate and inevitable result? Easy answers are a dime a dozen, and Nakahashi's project, thankfully, provides none. ■

Smith College Museum of Art – www.smith.edu/artmuseum/

Artist/filmmaker Luke Jaeger teaches animation at Massachusetts College of Art. His animated films have been shown in festivals and theaters worldwide.