

OCTOBER 2017  
**KOTA EZAWA**



*Kota Ezawa continues to revisit history. In these two new prints he layers two events over each other to make new connections across time. Here he talks about the result of these surprising juxtapositions.*

**Q:** How did the idea of superimposing the Mondrian piece over the Beatles image come to you?

**Kota Ezawa:** Last summer I was invited to propose an artwork for the International Terminal at San Francisco International Airport. The photograph of the Beatles exiting a plane on their first U.S. tour immediately came to my mind—but this image by itself seemed too predictable. The other issue was that in my experience, black-and-white doesn't work very well in public spaces. Superimposing Mondrian solved both of my issues. It added an alternative narrative to the piece, making it more complex, and it also infused some color.

**Q:** In what ways do you see correspondences between the Beatles and Mondrian as artists?

**KE:** The Beatles and Mondrian are both pioneers in their respective fields. Mondrian's work radically impacted the trajectory of painting in the 20th century. The Beatles revolutionized rock and pop. Both of them also have a very classic style that I appreciate. Piet Mondrian's work is very matter of fact if you compare it to Wassily Kandinsky, another abstract painter of his time. The Beatles come across kind of "square" next to the much hipper, wilder Rolling Stones, but that's also what makes them great.

**Q:** Why did you choose the Albers image to pair with the Joni Mitchell?

**KE:** This pairing also came out of an idea for a public artwork, this one for a large-scale mural in La Jolla. I thought that the folksy image of Joni Mitchell paired with the warm color hues of the Albers composition would resonate with California beach culture, desert landscape, and sunsets in the ocean. When I presented this work to the curator of the mural project, she remarked that it made her think of Mitchell's engagement with political protest and Albers's flight from Nazi Germany. It's not necessarily what I thought of, but it seems that making any art at this moment immediately turns into a political gesture.

**Q:** What were the challenges of realizing these ideas as a prints? Could you describe the process?

**KE:** All credit in this regard goes to Z and Pam and everyone else working at the press. My understanding is that the process is called a step etch, something we have used with great success (in my opinion) for The Last Sitting, one of the first prints we did together many years ago.



Modernist Folk Song, 2017  
Color aquatint. Paper Size: 29" x 28"; Edition of 30

**Q:** How do you feel your work is influenced by these modernists?

**KE:** There is a superficial connection between their work and mine in that we all use flat colors. Beyond that, I feel that as an artist raised in Germany, modernism has been part of my visual upbringing. The Bauhaus movement has had a huge and lasting impact on architecture, design, and art made in Germany. My parents' house was also loosely built in Bauhaus style, with very uncomfortable Le Corbusier chairs in the living room and abstract paintings on the wall.

**Q:** Albers designed some album covers in his lifetime, and pop bands have issued records with covers inspired by Mondrian—how do you think album cover design has influenced the reception or perception of abstract art, and vice versa?

**KE:** In the era of vinyl records, album covers were a perfect tool to get artworks into the hands of young people. Mapplethorpe's *Horses* or Warhol's *Sticky Fingers* are prime examples of artists making use of this format. Album covers have also inspired artists' projects like Christian Marclay's album cover collages. One other reason why abstract art might gravitate towards album covers might also be the perfectly square proportion of the record sleeve, which was the preferred format for abstract artists like Mondrian, Malevich, Agnes Martin, or Josef Albers.

**Q:** Are you planning more pairings of musicians and modernist

artworks? How do you decide which ones to choose?

**KE:** I'm currently working on an animated film in which a spoken word performance by Leonard Cohen is overlaid with a geometric animation based on Hans Richter's Dada film *Rhythm 21*. This film will be part of a tribute show to Leonard Cohen at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montréal later this year. There is a bit of trial and error in the process of choosing musicians and abstractions, but I've had good luck so far.

**Q:** Where do you place these images in the unfolding of your art—how do you see them rising out of what you had been working on before, or where are they leading you next?

**KE:** Music and the Beatles in particular have been a reoccurring subject of my work. In 2004, I presented a video installation called *Lennon Sontag Beuys*, in which John and Yoko's *Bed-in for Peace* was juxtaposed with political speeches by Joseph Beuys and Susan Sontag. *Beatles Über California*, a film in which I mashed up performances by the Beatles and the Dead Kennedys, is perhaps my most seen work to date. These new pieces also reference mashup and hip hop, musical forms that have been part of my practice since making *The History of Photography Remix* in 2005. I plan to present the sum of my abstract art/music mashups in a show called *The Geometry of Rock 'n' Roll* in 2018. It's hard for me to think beyond this point, but I've never had a lack of follow-up projects...

**Q:** Do you think the lines between "highbrow" art (as represented by Mondrian and Albers) and "popular" art (the Beatles, Mitchell) are as distinct or as relevant as they once were perceived to be?



Mondrian Meets the Beatles, 2017  
Color aquatint. Paper Size: 25" x 30 3/4"; Edition of 30

**KE:** The divide between highbrow and pop seems to be shrinking. What made Mondrian and Albers "highbrow" and the Beatles "pop" was perhaps the income level or the educational degrees earned by their consumers and collectors—but it seems like this is changing also. Everyone can download a JPEG of Mondrian, and museums dedicate shows to Sonic Youth, Kraftwerk, and other pop bands. If anything, I feel pop has won, and highbrow is on the way out.