

OKTP



KOTA EZAWA

7.25.2006

Kota Ezawa's personal narrative is visible in his work, yet he provides viewers only an edited view. While his art may be highly personal, it is not confessional. He chooses to work intuitively with an image or series of images. Later he may recognize the personal connection, but it is not his primary concern. Each animation, transparency, and intaglio print explores the psychological impact of a revised photograph and its relationship with different technologies.

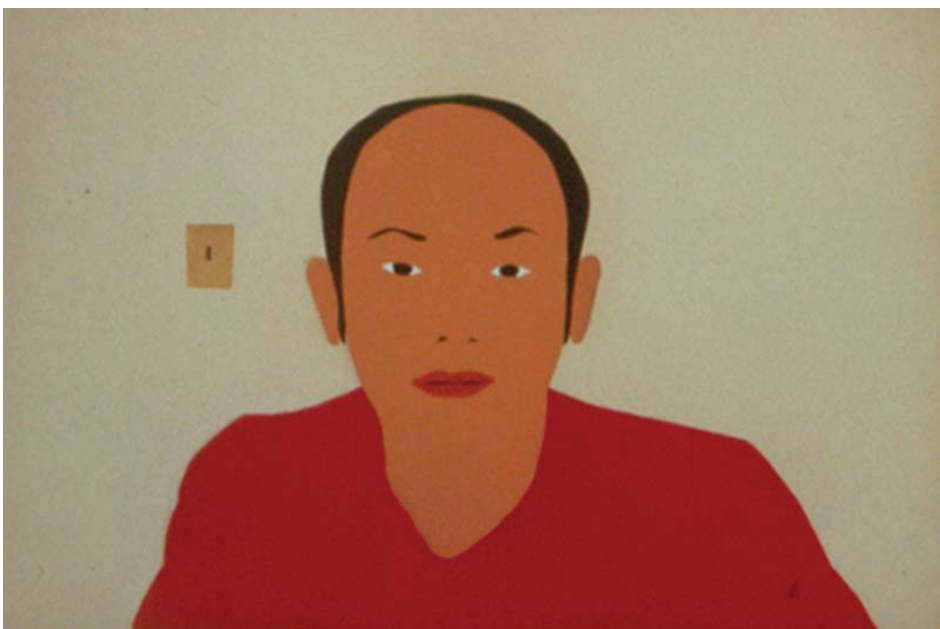
At first, Ezawa may seem an unusual artist to engage in intaglio printmaking. He is best known for animated videos and light boxes that reinterpret contemporary iconic photographs. Ezawa's work at Paulson Press reflects his process of inquiry.

He says that his own working process on the computer is similar to a drawing process, but more forgiving than painting or printmaking because of the "undo" command. Undeterred by the lack of easy erasure, he worked painstakingly on each print to get to the essence of what he perceived as the significant iconic image.

His best-known works reinterpret famous events such as the Simpson verdict or the Patty Hearst bank heist, and his reworking of photography is almost always connected in some way to his own biography. This series of prints allows his audience to see how the famous, infamous, and unknown are all part of the artist's process of discovery.

The print "Wanda" draws on a photograph of Ezawa's mother-in-law, a woman

he never met, but who has become a mythical figure in his life. "Schleyer" depicts Hanns Martin Schleyer, a former SS officer whose abduction and killing in the 1970s by the Baader Meinhof gang was well known in Germany, where Ezawa grew up. He is reaching into uncertain times and places and bringing powerful images to the fore for new understandings. His own self-portrait, "Kota," is pared down to a minimum number of "cut-outs," but may be the most revealing print in the series. The piece began as a device for him to introduce his videos abroad and later became his "passport image." The nearly blank face suggests an individual open to all kinds of information and the unadorned room, punctuated by only a light switch, mirrors that sense of possibility.



(Left) **Kota**, 2006
Color aquatint etching;
Paper Size: 19.5" x 23"; Edition of 35

(Bottom) **Wanda**, 2006
Color aquatint etching;
Paper Size: 20.5" x 23.75"; Edition of 35





(Above) **Schleyer**, 2006
Color aquatint etching;
Paper Size: 23.25" x 19.5"; Edition of 35

(Left) **Polaroid Land Camera**, 2006
Color aquatint etching;
Paper Size: 20.5" x 21.75"; Edition of 35

We spoke with him in his studio, a small spare room furnished with a table, a few chairs, and video equipment in San Francisco's Mission District.

Q: I want to talk about your animations and how they translate into prints.

Kota Ezawa: My whole approach to animation is to treat it like a moving painting. It's not goofy or funny and it is very much like a painting, but over time.

Q: The imagery in your videos is built up on a computer?

KE: Yes. It's a kind of low-tech form of digital animation. In "The Simpson Verdict," you hear the voices, but the whole time you just see the face of OJ Simpson and his legal defense team.

Q: Why did you choose the OJ verdict drama as a subject?

KE: It's really a very intuitive process—I oftentimes decide to work with a certain subject before I figure out why I do it. I wanted to make a character animation, and pretty much the first thing that came to my mind was the OJ Simpson verdict.

Cartoon drawing and animation has this connotation of being funny. There is always "funny" movement, bouncing and

punching. I thought it would be very interesting to do something that's not funny. Most people think of this event as divisive and tragic. I was interested in taking something that's clearly not funny and turning it into an animation. Animation also has this kind of relationship to movement. I was interested in making animation that's more psychological. I don't want to make some kind of political commentary on the event.

Q: Tell me how you know when you've seen a piece of found imagery?

KE: I have to see it in my mind's eye first. It's not that I go into libraries and browse for images, but it's more than I'm sitting at home and then I think of an image and think that that might be an interesting image to translate.

Q: How do you know when you've moved far enough away from the original to have remixed it or reinvigorated it?

KE: I think it has a lot to do with the amount of information in the image. It's a sort of minimalism, because I like to make a kind of striking image with the least amount of information possible. I'm not interested in drawing a lot of details. I start with a very basic drawing, and then

the moment where I think the image has some kind of an effect, that's when I stop.

Q: Where did some of these other images come from? For example, the image of Schleyer, who was kidnapped and assassinated in Germany in the 1970s, and of Leni Reifenstahl the filmmaker. I don't think that those images resonate with non-Europeans.

KE: This whole body of work explores my memory of images, because that's how I come to them, through my personal memory. A lot of the American images are globally recognized images, like the first photo of earth from moon and the Polaroid camera. All of these had equal exposure in Germany. I moved from Germany to California when I was 25, so a lot of the pop imagery that is in my mind is German.

I'm really interested in the idea of German pop, which sounds kind of strange, because Germans are not so pop.

Q: Are all these images viewed through a German lens?

KE: I think that artists, musicians, every outfit that you have, you know? You have to kind of work within your folkloristic tradition. I was born in 1969, and I grew

up in the '70s, and I'm of mixed ethnicity, Japanese and German. I spoke English fluently when I was 12. I listened to the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley before I was 10 years old. So I can't really say that German culture is my culture. I feel that all these images are part of my culture, whether they're specifically German or not. And now I've lived in California for over 10 years, and this is an immigrant state. So it becomes even more muddled what my culture is.

Q: What about the introduction of personal imagery? The middle-aged woman, Wanda, is your mother-in-law?

KE: Yeah. I never met my mother-in-law, so to me she only exists in photographs and storytelling. She lived in this really religious, small town in Texas, but she had the reputation of being this very wild woman. And so for me, this photograph has almost the same psychological charge as the OJ Simpson verdict or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I have a feeling that I would have really liked her just because I know the music she listened to and how she spent her time.

I think that each of these images represents an aspect of photography, and I guess the picture of my mother-in-law also represents an aspect or function of photography, the family photo album.



(Above) **Earth From Moon**, 2006
Color aquatint etching;
Paper Size: 20.5" x 22.75"; Edition of 35

(Right) **Riefenstahl**, 2006
Color aquatint etching;
Paper Size: 19.5" x 23"; Edition of 35

Q: When you were at Paulson, did the process that you were encountering there change your decision about the images you wanted to use?

KE: My images are very pared down. But for the printing, even more so. I find it necessary to use very simple and undetailed images to bring across the effect I want in the printing process.

Q: What about the layers? The strategy of assemblage must be different.

KE: There is a different logic behind it, but you also work with these layers in animation. You constantly have to think—okay, if I draw this house, on what layer does this house have to be?


Q: Intaglio printing is a craft process that dates back centuries, and it involves a lot of handwork. Given your background with the computer, were you surprised by the experience?

KE: Going into it, I thought the process would be very similar, because what I do on the computer is very close to manual painting, even though I use a mouse or a stylus. It is a drawing process. But then actually there were some significant differences. On the Macintosh, you can always hit Apple-Z, and it undoes your last step. You can't do that on the copper plate. In my work, it is very important

that I have almost geometric curves. It's always very sharp, like a tense line. To achieve that with a brush is very difficult. On the first day at Paulson, I found that my hand was shaking, and it took me a few days to figure out that it has to do with breathing, and you have to breathe evenly and have just the right amount of liquid on the brush to be able to achieve this line, and that's very different from working on a computer.

Q: How have the prints influenced your work?

KE: I'm interested in looking at photographs from the 1850s as well as images from 2003 and even exploring the possibilities of photography in the future. It's the same thing with the materials that I use. For awhile, I was very stuck with video, but now recently I've used 60 mm film, which is a more ancient moving image process, but I'm also interested in using very future-oriented processes like HDTV. Every form or format gives the image a different energy.

I was really interested in the Polaroid print, because it's such a technical image, how it would translate in this ancient technique? I think it gets charged, by the way, because Rembrandt could never have made this image of the Polaroid camera—it didn't exist then. I like these tensions. 





Kota Ezawa and Renee Bott working in the studio.

Please join us for a reception with the artists: Wednesday, September 20th, 6-8pm

SEPTEMBER 20TH-FEBRUARY 24TH, 2007

DRAW ON PHOTOGRAPHY:
New Etchings by Kota Ezawa and Isca Greenfield-Sanders

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