

Silver Sunlight Path

The interior of a partially sunlit room initially addresses the viewer in Hiraki Sawa's contemplative, black-and-white video *trail* (2005). The steady view of casement windows adjusts to a cropped frame and a slow pan of a well-worn floor. The scene transitions: the camera, now still, lingers on a broom and dustbin. A soft, music-box-type melody repeats as the sequence continues to unfold; a close-up shot of a tarnished baseboard segues into a scene of subtle wonderment. A hazy shaft of light illuminates a ruddy carpet where silhouettes of small, perambulating camels begin to appear, each one following the other in a circular pattern. The herd ambles into view like actors taking the stage, they move into the spotlight from places just out of sight. As the scene of the dimly lit room dissolves into a tightly framed close-up of a bathroom sink, replete with a dripping faucet, our eyes begin to search for the desert creatures. Contentedly, we await their impending arrival.

Using a combination of still and moving imagery, short and long takes, and close-up and distant views of humble spaces and objects, Sawa deftly weaves a series of tableaux together that entices viewers to join the shadow figures on a journey through a defamiliarized domestic landscape that paradoxically takes the viewer everywhere, yet nowhere in particular. In *trail*, Sawa's camels traverse overlooked corners and dusty ledges: they meander on the edges of handrails, windowsills, faucets, and shabby carpets. The animals slip into and out of our view, and their presence animates this anonymous and otherwise lifeless space. Confined to mundane interiors, the roving animals, with their ceaseless peregrinations, are emblematic of the trappings of reality and our desire to escape it.

While *trail* offers no specific narrative or account of events, the work provides an expanded space for association and conjecture about the perceptions of nature, technology, and illusionism in the digital age. *Trail* is one of ten single-channel videos presented in *Betwixt & Between*, a group exhibition of contemporary short videos that inject the ordinary domestic landscape with existential content and psychological slippages. Though diverse in approach and presentation, artists Terry Fox, Nadia Hironaka, Alex Hubbard, Takeshi Murata, Jeff Ostergren, Delphine Reist, Hiraki Sawa, Carrie Schneider, and Tom Thayer create dream-like, non-narrative videos that revel in the indeterminate spaces and sensations that exist between the conscious and the unconscious, the logical and the absurd, and the familiar and the unexpected.

Rejecting the grand spectacularization of video made prominent through the production of monumental, multi-channel installation works of the 1990s, and the simulated fantastical worlds found in electronic games and more recent cinematic animations, the artists in *Betwixt & Between* embrace the minutiae and materiality of the mundane, revealing its equally potent, transformative effects. In *trail*, for example, a lowly apartment dwelling becomes an exotic landscape through which shadows of camels, elephants, and birds pass unnoticed. In Alex Hubbard's *Announcement* (2007), the artist employs a photocopier, magic hat, trick flowers, and spaghetti, among other objects to build a layered, incomprehensible image. A non-descript, empty office space unexpectedly becomes a site of utter chaos and destruction in Delphine Reist's *Averse (Rain)* (2007). Cacophonous yet contemplative, together the works elicit feelings of bemusement, wonderment, and disillusionment in the viewer, using minimal means.

Capturing ordinary experience and events on film, and modifying them through technical processes to create feelings of disorientation and uncertainty in people, echoes the machinations of the Surrealist filmmakers of 1920s and '30s. A well-documented, yet highly contentious and often divided movement, Surrealism and its adherents favored chance, absurdity, and dream-logic as strategies for artistic production.¹ In the hands of Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel among others, film becomes the ultimate medium for exploring randomness and expressing the dream state.² These artists probed the physio-temporal



Hiraki Sawa, *trail*, 2005
Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York

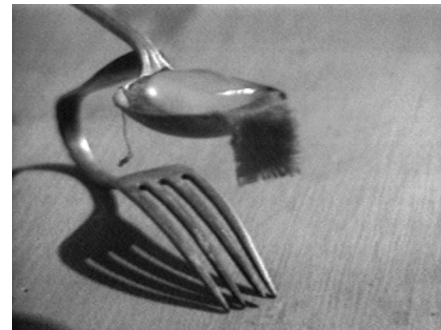
boundaries that distinguish the actions of watching and seeing—which our 21st Century eyes can no longer discern.

Such elisions occur in Nadia Hironaka's seemingly effortless *Light Switch Daydream* (2005). An image of a light switch is projected onto the wall. A hand reaches up to flip the switch. At first, almost imperceptibly, the baroque floral wallpaper behind the switch appears to move. Colorful, hand-painted flowers begin to appear simultaneously on the blank surface of the switch, and the cycle begins again. Here, the effects of real and digital time are collapsed into a suspended animated hallucination that converts a simple domestic object into cybernetic material.

The subtlety and clarity of Hironaka's video echoes similar qualities found in the works by Terry Fox. The transformative potential of domestic objects is perhaps nowhere more visible than in his long admired, *Children's Tapes* (1974). A central figure in the development of West Coast conceptual and performance art during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Terry Fox created seemingly minimal works based on simple, ritualized actions in which his body frequently acted as an elemental force. Fox, who suffered from Hodgkin's disease until the end of his life in 2008, frequently addressed the failures, limitations, and vulnerabilities of the body using common materials such as thread, water, wax, food, and wire, which the artist manipulates into complex rituals invoking process and interdependence.

Children's Tapes is emblematic of Fox's use of "gentle yet blunt imagery."³ As described by Fox, *Children's Tapes* is a series of silent video tapes made for children in which the same elements (spoon, bowl, cloth, candle, etc...) appear, yet are conceived in new situations and transformed states.⁴ Originally shot on videotape using a Sony Portopak® camera, Fox presents viewers with tightly framed, close-up views of liquid saturating a dry cloth, water droplets falling and resting on the tine of a fork, and moments of combustion and extinguishment, among others. The low hum generated by the camera's machinery in the background has a lulling effect, which complements Fox's quiet, humble actions.

In effect, the work seeks to connect to a purer level of thought, one uninfluenced by the conditions and demands of contemporary life, which Fox concluded was connected to the attitude of wonderment held by children. In a 1974 interview with *Avalanche Newspaper* co-founders Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp, Fox explains:



Terry Fox, *Children's Tapes*, 1974
Courtesy EAI, New York

TF: Well, amazing things are happening. That's why I shot them really close up, to focus on the minute events. But besides that, there's a kind of attitude that's communicated by the tapes.

LB: What attitude?

TF: An attitude of contemplation... of wonderment, of relating to something real... without having to take sides...⁵

The lighthearted tone and openness conveyed in *Children's Tapes* also underscores the work of Alex Hubbard. Often disorienting and absurd, Hubbard's actions, installations, and



Nadia Hironaka, *Light Switch Daydream*, 2005
Courtesy of the artist

videos frequently interrogate the construction and appearance of images. In his short video, *Announcement* (2007), the camera records a parade of small, random objects that he places on the glass surface of the copier. A magic hat, trick flowers, colored films, and a light bulb are piled on top; copies are made, subsequently adding another layer of imagery to a densely packed field. In *Announcement*, Hubbard lays bare the medium as a digital canvas, a virtual repository and indexical archive for images, gestures, and marks.

Hubbard's technique of image-construction echoes that of collage. The assembling of discordant materials into a unified composition—a process long prized by the Dadists and Surrealists—collage forms the visual and aural foundations of Tom Thayer's short, stop-animation videos. In *Tunnel Jerk* (2010) and *Old Smelly Haircut* (2008), Thayer constructs worlds-within-worlds that appear broadcast on vintage-style television monitors. In both works, young children appear. Their vaguely human bodies are made from cutouts of obsolete academic textbooks, magazines, calendars, and other mass-produced printed matter. Thayer's wild, ghoulish-looking youth appear in mundane settings. The kids interact easily with one another in nature and the classroom, yet their actions and communication appear completely incomprehensible and foreign to us. The disquieting effects of Thayer's illogical animations are enhanced by playful, yet equally cryptic, sonic mash-ups that accompany his imagery.

In *Exquisite Corpse* (2010), Jeff Ostergren also uses collage-based techniques and found imagery to address the absurdity of language and the bewildering experience of human existence in contemporary culture. Three channels of video are merged into one projection compiled of fragments of television commercials that advertise remedies for ailments to the head, heart, and reproductive organs. Clips of talking heads, cartoon characters, company logos, idyllic landscapes and sunny, domestic interiors fill the wall; the images shift, changing rapidly and the familiar sound-bites for pitches to "fix" people slowly begins to drive us mad. Ceaseless chatter turns into exotic babble, and suddenly, our ears can only discern, now meaningless, single words.

Like Ostergren, new media artist Takeshi Murata mines found material and re-animates it to disorienting effect. In *Untitled (Silver)* (2006), Murata manipulates a sequence from Italian director Mario Bava's 1960 black-and-white horror film, *Black Sunday*. Forms dissolve into pixilated swaths of gray, silver, black and white. Interior walls appear as gooey pools of velvety black; our eyes discern movements of figures that rarely appear in their entirety. Distinguishable patterns converge and collapse, nothing ever stays in place long enough to comprehend. Ambient sounds of gurgling liquid and echoing electronic chords accompany Murata's hallucinogenic-inducing scenes. The instability and relentless decomposition of Murata's imagery is also an elegiac comment on the technological obsolescence of film itself in the digital age. In effect, Murata's work recalls the photographic experimentations of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, and the magical possibilities of film that the Lumière brothers, Thomas Edison, Georges Méliès, and others marshaled a century ago.



Takeshi Murata, *Untitled (Silver)*, 2006
Courtesy EAI, New York



Tom Thayer, *Old Smelly Haircut*, 2008
Courtesy of the artist

The emphasis on the ceaseless disintegration of form captured by Murata in *Untitled (Silver)* is perhaps only outdone by Delphine Reist in her slyly aggressive video *Rain (Averse)* (2007). The image of an anonymous empty office is projected onto a wall at the far end of the gallery. Devoid of people and furniture, the blankness of the white-walled room is strangely overwhelming. Stark, fluorescent light illuminates the space. Without warning, the fluorescent bulbs begin falling out the ceiling fixtures like rain from the sky. The bulbs, bounce, crash, and shatter into

