

**“Harvest of Death” 2005. By Kota Ezawa
Spotlight Presentation by Robert Barrett, February 2019**



Artist's Background:

Kota Ezawa was born in 1969 in Cologne, Germany. His childhood was spent in the suburbs of Stuttgart, Germany. His nationality is Japanese-German-American. Kota Ezawa currently resides in Oakland, California.

Education and Experience

Kota Ezawa attended Kunstakademie Dusseldorf from 1990 until 1994; a period when art luminaries such as Gerhard Richter, Nam June Paik and Tony Cragg were faculty members at the Academy. In 1995 he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the San Francisco Art Institute. In 2003 he completed a Masters of Fine Arts at Stanford University. He is currently an Associate Professor of Film and Fine Arts at the California College of the Arts (CCA). His work has been exhibited globally in solo and group exhibitions. A few of the institutions that hold his work in their permanent collections are the Palm Springs Art Museum, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and in New York City both the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have Ezawa's in their collections. A number of books have been published on Kota Ezawa's work, most notably Nazraeli Press' *The History of Photography Remix* was published in 2007 and *The Crime of Art* by Radius Books was published in 2017. He

received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award in 2003, a SECA Art Award from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2006 and a Eureka Fellowship in 2010.¹

Description and Timeline of Artwork

Harvest of Death was created in 2005. The image was digitally drawn and then electronically transferred to a commercial electronic sign production company that printed the image on glass with a light box surround. *Harvest of Death* Was produced in an edition of four. The museum's piece is 2/4 in the edition. The work is comprised of simplified forms that collectively depict a battlefield strewn with corpses. In the far middle-ground a man on horseback and two standing figures survey the carnage which is rendered in muted gradations of blue and grey. The background of the work is a sky void of shape or atmosphere.²

Harvest of Death is one image from a sequential series of images that addresses the history of photography from 1839 up to a self-portrait of the artist taken in 2005. The images in the series are relevant to the artist and his career long musing about perception, history and memory brought on by the invention of photography. *Harvest of Death* is appropriated from an 1863 Civil War photograph of Union soldiers lying dead on a battlefield taken by documentary photographer Timothy H. O'Sullivan.³

The series is entitled *History of Photography Remix*. It exists both as a "slide show" of the entire series and in an editioned Duratrans format of single images such as the work in the Palm Springs Art Museum's collection. The word *Remix* in the series' title references hip-hop culture and the way that DJ's mix Pop music to create new effects. And indeed, that is how Ezawa imagines his approach to producing his series that appropriates 43 images from the history of photography. The artist "riffs" on each image to create new meaning and a contemporary perspective of memory and perception provoking his viewers to be mindful that history is seen through an interpretive lens.⁴

Influences

Conceptual Art captured Ezawa's attention during his formative years spent at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf. However, once the artist settled in the United States, he focused on Andy Warhol for his appropriation of product brands, iconic photographic imagery of celebrities and photos of calamities. Warhol then transformed the iconic imagery into billboard sized paintings and multiples resulting in a simultaneous cool and hot body of work that encapsulated the time utterly and catapulted Warhol to mega-star fame. Secondly Ezawa references, painter Alex Katz, for his use of unpainterly flat fields of color and few lines to construct his unique style. This writer also believes that Ezawa's paternal ancestry must have made him aware of Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints in which multiple wood blocks were carved, inked and then printed, as if assembling a puzzle, to make one of the most compelling graphic forms in the history of art. Kota Ezawa's complex and indirect approach to creating imagery mirrors the ukiyo-e print process.

Art Movement

Kota Ezawa is not alone in his practice of repurposing photographic imagery and utilizing digital processes to produce his oeuvre and Duratrans lightboxes to present his work. Many artists around the world work and present their work similarly. Brian Alfred is an artist that Ezawa references as working along the same lines. There is not yet a name for such work. Thus, Ezawa's work falls into the category of *International Contemporary*.

Medium

The commercial process, known as Duratrans was invented by the Eastman Kodak Company in the late 1970s and trademarked in 1982. Duratrans film was originally exposed photographically and developed chemically using a similar process as conventional lab photography. Over time, the name Duratrans has been generalized to apply to various large format, backlit graphic lightboxes, generated in a variety of ways including photochemical and various types of inkjet processes. It is widely used for large format illuminated commercial signage in public spaces. Duratrans illuminated lightboxes deliver superb color fidelity and resolution. Signage in New York's Times Square is an outstanding example of the effectiveness of the medium. Contemporary artists have coopted Duratrans lightboxes for their capability of delivering imagery that pops. Contemporary artists must find new ways to be noticed and Duratrans allow artists to take their work into the streets. We can expect to see an increased use of the medium by artists.⁷

Technique and Methodology

To date, Kota Ezawa has utilized digital animation, slide projections, paper cut-outs, watercolor, lightboxes, collage and printmaking in his art practice. He is best known for his computer animated films of contemporary events. A notable example of his animation is the 2.31-minute film entitled *O.J. Simpson Verdict* that can be viewed here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=VS96qtp7_hl .

Using a computer tablet, Kota Ezawa, "paints" his images for his film frames and his still pictures. In *History of Photography Remix*, as in all his work, the artist reconceptualizes photographs by purposely simplifying and flattening forms in order to make the finished work more symbolic and "fictionalized". Ezawa believes that "history has become a fiction". In his work he attempts to address this perspective by reducing photographic and filmed images into symbols. Symbols are, in the artist's opinion, more powerful and resonate more than the "reality" of photography or non-animated film.²

Artists Impact on the Art World

Kota Ezawa's success is evidence of the art world's interest in his prolonged practice of exploring issues of reality, perception, memory and the power of symbols. However, he is not alone in this endeavor. Nor is he or his cohort the first to explore such issues which have been at the center of art practice throughout the history of Modernism and Contemporary Art. His use of the commercial medium of Duratrans is also not unique to his work. Avant-garde he is not. However, there is a unique poetic sweetness in his work that sustains a viewer's interest.

Analysis of the Artwork

Harvest of Death is a cerebral musing on memory and symbols. The work's small format and grayed tonal pallet resonates very quietly in a gallery of bold, emotionally charged works of art, that clamor for attention. Ezawa's work can be overlooked by the average museum goer and even the experienced art follower. However, the piece can provide a rarefied and esoteric snack for the deeply committed.

Compare and Contrast the Artwork to Other Works in the Museum's Collection

Ezawa's cool and intellectual approach to making art could be compared to Andrea Zittel's art practice. Both artists produce works that at first glance appear detached and

passionless. On the other hand, Anselm Kiefer, whose painting *L'Ascension* at one time shared a gallery space with Ezawa's *Harvest of Death*, produces highly charged, expressive and flamboyant works, that demand attention and an immediate emotional response. Yet, upon closer examination, it is apparent that all three artists' works are deeply felt and worthy of contemplation.

Suggestions on How to Tour This Artwork

Harvest of Death provides an opportunity to discuss with guests the long-standing interest among artists to address memory, perception and symbols. Comparing and contrasting Ezawa's *Harvest of Death*, Timothy H. O'Sullivan's 1863 Civil War battlefield photograph, that inspired Ezawa's remix, and Picasso's *Guernica* could lead to a discussion about the meaning and symbolism of the color of gray and the differences between the O'Sullivan photograph and the Ezawa work it inspired. The discussion could then address the difference of a Modernist approach of depicting a horror of war scene (*Guernica*) to a Contemporary Art approach (*Harvest of Death*).

Guests could be shown O'Sullivan's photograph by holding a copy adjacent to the Ezawa. Using the inquiry method guests could be asked:

- What do you see?
- Why do you say that?
- How does the color grey in the photograph make you feel?
- How do the greyed tones in the Ezawa work make you feel?
- How does grey in these two works functions as a memory device?
- Do the grey tones lessen or heighten the sense of violence in the two works?
- Would the photograph and Ezawa's work be stronger if they were in color?

Now remove the O'Sullivan photograph and share the Picasso image. Inform the guests a bit about *Guernica*. Share that *Guernica* was made in 1937 and that *Harvest of Death* was made in 2004 and then ask:

- What is similar between the two works of art? What is different?
- Why do you think Picasso, who had no problem using color, elected to use only grey tones in *Guernica*?
- Which of the two works do you like the best? Why?
- By comparing these two works of art have we learned something about the difference between Modern and Contemporary art? What are the differences?

History of the Acquisition

Harvest of Death was gifted to the museum in 2008 by Joe and Pamela Bonino the same Joe Bonino that is featured in Robert Arneson's sculpture in the Palm Springs Art Museum's collection.

Two images from Kota Ezawa's History of Photography Remix



3-D Movie Audience (1952), 2005



Kota (2005), 2006

Bibliography

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