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ART REVIEW: "Timed Release"

Considering hopelessness

By Rebecca Rafferty on December 16, 2009

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Of all the things we take for granted in our daily experience, perhaps foremost is our basic physical freedom. Artist Heidi Kumao, a 2009 Guggenheim fellow and current artist resident of The Visual Studies Workshop, is interested in the ways "hostages, detainees, prisoners, slaves, people living under dictatorships, and soldiers stuck in trenches have all devised survival strategies in which they concede utter powerlessness while secretly nurturing a spark of creative regeneration," per the provided artist statement. "Timed Release" is inspired by historic and contemporary individuals and groups who "developed a creative mental space to survive physical confinement."

The show is spare, yet compelling: the three installations are little islands of light and sound in two darkened rooms; viewers find themselves alone with the stories in a distraction-less vacuum, immersed in the experience. Each of the "performative portraits" are mini-theatricals, meshing interactions between projected animations on both a wall and an object contained within a bell jar, the shadows of those objects, and sound.

Image from "Correspondence," part of Heidi Kumao's "Timed Release," exhibit at VSW. PHOTO PROVIDED

"Transplant" is the show's strongest piece, graceful and meditative while spilling over with visual pathos. The work examines how Japanese nationals and citizens who were interned in War Relocation Centers in California during WWII "cultivated gardens as a creative outlet to survive their confinement," and "constructed beautifully landscaped parks complete with ponds, rock gardens, and bridges [...transforming] gravel into gardens, altering their built environment as an act of defiance," writes Kumao.

Image from "Correspondence," part of Heidi Kumao's "Timed Release," exhibit at VSW. PHOTO PROVIDED

The short looped piece opens with the text of the Western Defense War Time Council's "Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry" projected on the wall. In a bout of epic visual storytelling that borders on the magical, we witness images shift form and flow into one another: fingerprints of the prisoners are taken, windblown into dust, which then forms faces of detainees on a tag suspended in the bell jar. Family photographs are swept with a shadow broom into a shadow dustpan, and deposited as dirt into the dry wasteland of the camps. The shadow of an

armed guard and a prison tower draped with the American flag loom over prisoners tending a garden with a backdrop of rows of warehouse barracks. Drawing on the Japanese tradition of telling stories with shadow puppets, Kumao has created a graceful visual and sound collage wound up in a symbolic retelling of reality. A single sprout appears and flourishes on the tag in the jar, symbolizing defiance, resilience, and hope.

The obvious heroes in this story were not U.S. officials, who called for and carried out the imprisonment of innocent people, but the ethnic Americans who were detained. We are as guilty of enthusiastically forgetting uncomfortable wrongs we have committed as any other nation that we criticize for ignoring atrocities. We don't dwell on the genocide of the Native Americans; we don't want to talk about slavery. We certainly can't question the reasoning behind wars we declare when the provided reasons fall short. If we can't go there, we can't learn anything about our willingness to perform reprehensible acts, even when we're justifying those actions with our fear. But succumbing to fear is the only true enemy of life. Kumao focuses on the bravest of actions in seemingly impossible situations.

Another piece deals with circumstance rather than politics. "Tether" is a work in progress that explores the horrific medical condition known as "Locked-in Syndrome," described by Jean-Dominique Bauby in his memoir, "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly." In 1995, Bauby suffered a massive stroke that left him completely paralyzed except for the use of his left eye, which he blinked to communicate to a therapist one letter of the alphabet at a time. Bauby described "his daily experiences with exceptional humor," states Kumao, an unfathomable year-long effort that culminated in the publication of his memoir only days before his death.

Any one of us can easily imagine the intensity of despair resultant from waking to find ourselves cut off from the world, aware but trapped within our own bodies. Bauby and his aides took the hard road of patience, as expressed in "Tether," a simple, undramatic, but unsettling piece. An isolated bell shape is suspended in a glass box; there is no motion, and only the same unchanging image projected onto the bell.

"Correspondence" is a tribute to political prisoner and prolific writer Nelson Mandela, and Terry Anderson, "a hostage who kept a miniature journal hidden from view by storing it in his underwear," writes Kumao. An open envelope stands under the bell jar; its house-shaped shadow on the wall is echoed by others nearby. While surveillance spotlights sweep the landscape, a shadow prisoner alternates between frantically cowering from the light, and calmly scrawling secret doorways on the walls. Lilting piano and discordant sounds layered with a marching drumbeat add a sense of urgency. Giant shadow hounds leap ferociously at the house, and a giant hand from the sky reaches down and annihilates the house in a shower of sparks, but "the prisoner has ultimately created the perfect means of escape through imagination and perseverance," states the artist.

A testament to human capability is present within the mystery of how each individual or group evaded the powerful onset of madness and despair. Kimao's works provide some rather humbling perspective while inspiring us to consider the power of the human mind. If the only way out is through, we must transform our approach to the experience. Apparently, we can do that.

"Timed Release"

By Heidi Kumao

Through December 20

Bookstore Gallery at The Visual Studies Workshop, 31 Prince St.

442-8676, **vsw.org**

Thursdays 5-8 p.m., Friday-Sunday noon-5 p.m.