



ARTIST

Heidi Kumao

TITLE

from Grad / Faculty Portfolio

DATE

1994

DIMENSIONS

4.5 in H x 2.125 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1994.017

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-29B

HEIDI KUMAO

BORN

1964

BIRTHPLACE

Berkeley, CA

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-Japanese-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Light Work Gallery, 1993
Light Work Grant, 1993
Artist-in-Residence, 2012

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 77
Contact Sheet 172

BIOGRAPHY

Heidi Kumao's artwork uses nineteenth century cinematographic technology to project sequences of images and text. Kumao uses old record players, lamps, lenses, and film to make machines that project up to 12 images in a sequence creating a unique fusion of photography, kinetics, and sculptural assemblage. These short sequences deal with themes of repetition and the cyclical nature of many behavior patterns. In the piece titled *Recital*, an index finger points in a downward motion and is projected onto a child's chalkboard easel. The projection machines are often built upon objects including a wagon, a chair, or a child's bench and the projections appear on a wall or hanging screen opposite the machine. Kumao uses these juxtapositions of object, image, and text to explore power imbalances between people in domestic and educational spheres as well as the slow decay of trust within these institutions. Kumao will use the Light Work Grant award to produce four new pieces which will focus on contradictory patterns of behavior between mother and daughter as they manifested themselves in her own family. Heidi Kumao is a Visiting Assistant Professor of photography at Syracuse University.

Heidi Kumao is an interdisciplinary artist who creates photographs, video, machine art, and installations to explore ordinary social interactions and their psychological undercurrents. Emerging from the intersection of sculpture, theater and engineering, her "performative technologies" generate artistic spectacle in order to visualize the unseen: power structures, emotions, compulsions, thinking patterns, and dreams. Kumao has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Creative Capital Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, AAUW (American Assn. of University Women), the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation. She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally, has been reviewed in publications such as *Artforum*, *ArtPapers*, and *Sculpture Magazine*, and her work is in a number of private and public collections including The Exploratorium, Houston Museum of Fine Arts and Light Work.

www.heidikumao.net

ESSAYS

Post-traumatic shadow plays? Screening rooms for troubled dreams? Heidi Kumao isn't sure what to call *Timed Release*, her meditation on the ways in which our humanity insinuates itself through cracks in the walls, literal or figurative, that confine us. It shares some DNA, Kumao suggests, with Shirin Neshat's split-screen "film experiences" and Krzysztof Wodiczko's projections on buildings. And, of course, it borrows some of its tropes from the stage, not to mention the movies and the museum vitrine. Asked for points of reference, the artist cites David Wilson's metacommentary on museum display in his *Museum of Jurassic Technology*, and the theatricality of works by Louise Bourgeois, Rebecca Horn, and Janine Antoni. None of which is much help when we're alone with *Timed Release*. Immersed in its son et lumière worlds, we think of shadow plays, naturally, since the actors in her videos appear in silhouette. But we're also reminded of Victorian stage magic, Muybridge's zoopraxiscope, jittery educational movies from Cold War classrooms, maybe even of Plato's cave and Baudrillard's postmodern hall of mirrors. Each of the four video installations in the series utilizes simple but effective cinematic trickery: a video projector casts one of Kumao's short films onto an object and the wall behind it. The object is a talisman, charged with narrative associations. Elements in the film have been tailored to fit the object precisely; as a result, it's absorbed into the onscreen world even as it causes that 2-D reality to bulge into three dimensions, extruding cinematic illusion into the gallery space. Brooding music and jarringly live sound effects thicken the emotional atmosphere. *Timed Release* comprises *Correspondence* (2008), *Transplant* (2009), *Tether* (2010), and *Trace* (2010). *Correspondence* evokes the waking nightmare lived by Terry Anderson and Nelson Mandela during their years in captivity. The two men were sustained, respectively, by secret diaries and public letters. *Transplant* tells the story of Japanese-Americans who, during World War II, were relocated to concentration camps such as Manzanar in the California desert. Despite the blast-furnace heat and never-ending gusts of grit, internees conjured Japanese gardens out of the wastelands. In a bell jar hangs a scrap of paper whose shape is a visual echo of the ID tags issued to Americans of Japanese ancestry. Projected images cause the iconic tag to morph into a specific individual's ID tag, a strut supporting a guard tower, an American flag, a bean sprout. *Tether* descends into the hope-crushing depths of locked-in syndrome, the terrifying catatonia that robbed stroke victim Jean-Dominique Bauby of everything but the ability to blink one eye. An enormous eye (again, projected on the signature bell jar) blinks, as Bauby did to pick out letters in the alphabet. Bauby's book *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly*, an exuberant crescendo of *joie de vivre*, was the result of his efforts. *Trace* chronicles Frederick Douglass's surreptitious struggle to jimmy slavery's bars on his imagination by learning to read and write. Of the four works, *Transplant* strikes closest to home: having grown up "half-Japanese" in California, Kumao saw, firsthand, how her Japanese-born father experienced the United States "as an 'outsider,' a target of the hostility directed toward anyone of Japanese descent during and after WWII." The seeds of the piece were sown by Kumao's discovery of *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens during Wartime*, Kenneth Helphand's book about gardens created by soldiers amid the trench warfare of WWI, gardens struggling for life in the Nazi-occupied Jewish ghettos of WWII, gardens springing up in Japanese-American internment camps such as Manzanar. "It is amazing to me," she says, "how the simple act of growing something provides hope and sustains people (despite horrendous conditions that would seem to make growing a garden an impossibility)." Kumao was fascinated by Dorothea Lange's photos of the camp, especially a picture of "an American flag waving in the wind and two children running through a sandstorm. Apparently the sand got in their hair, their clothes, their skin." As in the other works in *Timed Release*, it was important to Kumao that *Transplant* leave "a hopeful or subversive note" reverberating in the viewer's mind, despite the inescapable grimness of its subject. Near the end, a woman sweeps the desert floor, an exercise in absurdism worthy of a character in a Beckett play. "As she sweeps, however, her broom erases the shadow of the guard tower," Kumao points out, "a gesture that demonstrates the strength of the internees and

shows them in control of their environment. In the beginning of the piece, a hand broom erases the Japanese family portrait; the final scene shows an internee removing the signs of imprisonment.” She quotes from *Defiant Gardens*: “For many internees, a ‘certain attitude of acceptance and resignation, of *Shakata ga nai*—“it cannot be helped”—was coupled with the trait of *Gaman*—“perseverance and fortitude.”” Mark Dery Mark Dery is a cultural critic and essayist. He is the author, most recently, of the essay collection, *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts: Drive-By Essays on American Dread, American Dreams* (U. of Minnesota Press). He is at work on a biography of the artist, writer, and legendary eccentric Edward Gorey for Little, Brown. — Heidi Kumao lives in Ann Arbor, MI, and completed her residency at Light Work in August 2012. www.heidikumao.net