

REVIEWS

Hiraki Sawa



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JAMES COHAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

HIRAKI SAWA

Two things separate Hiraki Sawa's work from most video art on offer today. The first is that, with his most recent piece, *Murmuring* (2006), Sawa has managed to trace, or perhaps to forge, a link between certain capacities of digital video and certain logics of film and photography, those resolutely materialist practices from which many critics believe the advent of digital media mark a significant break. The second is that few other artists working in video, digital or otherwise, come across as so deeply concerned with not just what we, the spectators, see, but how we see it.

On the first point, anyone familiar with Muybridge's studies of animal locomotion will immediately recognise the animated profiles of horses and birds that pepper the scenes in *Murmuring*. Yet Sawa is careful to indicate that what he is offering is not produced by the pencil of nature, but by the willful intervention of the artist's own graphic inscriptions, whether these be made with a pencil, as demonstrated by the small outline of a galloping horse that we see drawn in a stairwell, or by digital means, as when the profile of a goat peels itself off the windowsill on which it has been traced, and then proceeds to run off screen.

This last little manoeuvre is of no little significance. It puts into play for digital video the animating force or representational tension behind much of the twentieth-century's most significant works of photography: the appearance or illusion of deep, three-dimensional space, knowingly traversed by the surface of its two-dimensional actuality. Sawa's animations revivify this tension for video, whether through the subtle shift demonstrated by our fugitive goat, or by its inverse, the projected line-animation of a horse that is tracked by the camera across varying surfaces – wall, bookshelf, window – of a domestic interior.

On the second point, it is satisfying to note that Sawa's concern for how the spectator views his work is an extension of this enfolding of two-dimensions and three. *Murmuring* is screened on two flat-panel monitors turned vertically, each placed adjacent to the other in the corner of a darkened gallery. Consequently we find ourselves not opposite a single picture plane, but between two, and witnesses to a real recession of physical space. Additionally, between the two monitors, shots are not always coordinated, so, often, when one monitor fades to black between scenes, the reflection of the other becomes visible in its place, further exacerbating the tension between what is apparent and what is actual.

Sawa's three-channel projection, *Going Places Sitting Down* (2004), deserves paragraphs of its own, but seen through the lens of *Murmuring*, two additional points can be made in closing. The first is that *Going Places...* demonstrates an equal concern for how the work is seen (the size and configuration of the work's three screens deploys one's peripheral vision in a manner wholly fitting the daydream sensibility on display); the second is that, surreal or not, there is one essay that should be required reading prior to seeing either work: Ernst Gombrich's 'Mediations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form'. The reader won't be sorry. *Jonathan T. D. Neil*

Hiraki Sawa, *Going Places Sitting Down*, 2004, three-channel video projection, edition of six, commissioned by the Heyward/Bloomberg Artists' Commission. Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York