

# Hana Sakuma

By Richard McRae

The work in this latest show by Hana Sakuma represents a change in concern as well as means of presentation. Since the show can be understood as a response to a prolonged period of study that has seen the development of theoretical and conceptual sophistication, this change is hardly surprising. This is not to say that her work has become unrecognisable from work of old but that concerns which lurked in the background previously have now been allowed full play.

In particular there is now within her production a sharpened sense of the absurd. With the comic moment given greater space it is no longer possible to consider her work without addressing this element. Whereas before her art bordered on the absurd – one thinks of the whole process of taking dandelion heads and trying to re-glue the light fluffy seeds back on for instance – this was always presented within a context which drew attention away from it. An aesthetic quality often underpinned much of her work. The comic was reigned in by this precious intervention and critical attention was drawn towards the implications of the style of presentation.

In a piece like *100 Books Which I Didn't Buy* (2005) however there has been a shucking off of the need to present precisely and neatly. The elegance of a slide-show draws attention away from the means of presentation and firmly on what actually is being shown; in this case a series of simple images of a hand holding different books. We encounter a multitude of books and that is that. Resultantly we have to make do and, in order to make a response, find something in these book covers by which to come to an understanding. But most irritatingly there is nothing there to latch onto. They are just book covers and the choice of book seems utterly random. There is no general theme to be found; some are fiction, others are not; some contain deeply serious content, others do not. The images of the books flicker by swiftly, depriving us of the opportunity to thoroughly inspect them. Occasionally one cover or another will catch our attention due to some flash of colour or picture, but this too is quickly past. Yet this image lingers just long enough to toy with us. It may have been too dramatic, brightly coloured, silly or strident. Whatever the cause, the image is that little bit more enticing and just for a moment we can grasp onto something more than the flicker. It is a moment of interest, an excitement of sensibility and through it floods our desire to understand. Yet it is not sustained.

There is a sort of game being set up by the work and through our encounter with it we tacitly agree to play on. For, as one image flickers by after another, we are



*died like a gentleman* 2002  
mixed media, installation at The Changing Room, Stirling, Scotland

caught in a sliding trap of desire, not just for the relief a brief glimmer of excitement a particular cover brings, but also for the object itself. A book reels into sight and we recognise it. We have either read it or we have heard of it and want to read it. While reflecting on the type of text we have just seen – while actually trying to remember what was written and what point of view given – another comes along and muddies the waters. The variety of texts on offer intermingles so that the propositions of a book of deep political intent become tainted by one which is just plain silly. Everything is kept plastic, held at a distance and mutable. This is highlighted by the title of the work which refers to both the desire of the artist to possess the book and, to the fact that she didn't actually buy it.

Socio-political issues are woven into the structure of the slide-show. The texts of many of the books refer to political, economic and sociological aspects of our culture. Moreover, we are offered baubles for which we are greedy to possess and hence issues of ownership and property are introduced. Within the playing out of the provocation of desires that the different images induce a moral imperative is realised. The work undercuts each specific instance of desire by maintaining it within a flickering assemblage. Yet Hana does not seek to negate these desires. Instead she brings about a situation whereby we ourselves undercut the potential of our own



*A practice 2005 (from the middle through the middle)  
an envelope inside out*

desire, through our ongoing greed for yet more relief from the threat of tedium the flicker induces. There is something absurd about this. Despite knowing that the next image will come and go, and the next after that, we nonetheless continue to wish to claim back the one image of note. We want something we cannot have but we still want it.

Ultimately the work represents a shift in how an understanding of the moral conscientiousness of the artist is communicated to the viewer via the work. This is made clear by comparing the slide-show to the other major work in the exhibition *died like a gentleman*, which was made in 2002. This large scale installation/sculpture is full of symbolic intent. The funeral black frame suggests that the viewer sit and study the blackboard with all its terrible import. The writing, partially erased, clearly pertains to how people die. This is a terrible device; a machine for the contemplation of death. Yet, for the most part, the implications of the work, our own eventual finitude, are played out as something to be read, thus bounded by the structure. This is realised by the aesthetic of the work. The idealised machine is something obviously crafted with a specific purpose in mind. We realise that we are to make an interpretation based on what is in front of us in order to apply its implications on ourselves. A demand is held within the work



*Making 2005 (from the middle through the middle)  
a stopper and a bottle*



*Prison 2002 (from the middle through the middle)  
an elbow patch and a piece of the sleeve*

that we use judgement to proceed. Just how successfully this aspect of the art functions depends on just how far we allow its symbolic content to affect us; and in this regard the sheer mass of the machine becomes an important factor in the work's success. The slide-show functions in an entirely different way. Therein is no dependence on symbolic content. It simply doesn't matter which actual books Hana chooses to present in order for us to become entangled in the games which arise from their presentation.

The small works which form the ongoing series, *from the middle through the middle*, bridge these two impulses. For the most part the particular objects presented lend themselves to being overlooked. They lay claim to short moments for our consideration. Lacking the grand, visual weight or the terrible import, of the large-scale sculpture they do not possess our attention in such a way as to overwhelm us. Nonetheless they can still be interpreted and read. Yet, being thus sleight, we are encouraged to move freely from one small work to another so that they form a series of small scale propositions, as if three dimensional sketches from an artist's notebook. As with a sketchbook we allow ourselves to browse through the series at our leisure, pausing on moments of interest and skipping others less noteworthy. It is the nature of sketchbooks that we do not give intense thought to every page but enjoy the

Yogurt-Iced semi-skimmed milk  
Summer has come

by Hana Sakuma

The arrival at the empty classroom  
The gift of extra 60 min  
The beginning of wintertime

by Hana Sakuma

3 glasses of diet coke  
3 hours in the smoky pub  
Shouting with a Japanese accent

by Hana Sakuma

Perhaps yes  
Perhaps no  
Degree of optimism

by Hana Sakuma

Someone's index finger  
Undecidedly moves in the air  
Slightly shifting my body  
Towards somewhere else

by Hana Sakuma

A short trip  
With a van driver  
New work in the back carriage

by Hana Sakuma

The unexpected present  
Secretly rubbing off the price label from it  
Big smile on my face

by Hana Sakuma

A calculated silence  
A little bit too obvious

by Hana Sakuma

*Haiku-like poems* 2005  
slide-show



*A moment before a quotation mark is closed* 2005 (from the middle through the middle)  
50 x 30 min, black and white prints

passage of exploration. A fascination is allowed to develop and, just with the slide-show of book covers, interpretations of one work become entangled with those from an assortment of others. We can look for specific instances of insight from the one object, hoping to become enthralled, but it is the greater game as played out by the group that lingers.

This characteristic is repeated with another slide-show Hana presents in the show. For *Haiku-like poems* (2005) lines of writing are presented in succession. Individually they offer charming ditties. As a whole they present a more serious face since we become aware of a calculated structure underpinning them. With our new understanding of what once was viewed as a slight absurdity we become worryingly engrossed by a game we create for ourselves. As a whole the work sustains an appeal which encourages further exploration of other works in the exhibition.

By shucking off the precious, aesthetic impulse Hana allows for a greater capacity of the viewer to engage with their own play of desires. Whether you enjoy this reflex or long for a more certain clarity of intent will greatly influence your assessment and appreciation of the work.

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