



Close up of Simon Fujiwara's 'Rebekkah' (2012) | © SIMON FUJIWARA, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TARO NASU, PHOTOGRAPH BY KIOKU KEIZO

ART

Fujiwara wants the dirt to stick

BY **JOHN L. TRAN**

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

MAR 8, 2016

White often seems to be used in contemporary art in Japan as a kind of short cut to signify “beauty,” “purity” or “spirituality.” Simon Fujiwara’s show “White Day” at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery is, as the title suggests, overwhelmingly white, but it’s designed not to stay that way.

The specially installed white carpet will get progressively get dirtier as time goes by, and Fujiwara is looking forward to having a photograph taken of the show on the last day, to show how “defiled” it will have become from visitors footprints and the muck trailed in from the street. Grubby tracks have already formed from the entrance, where a white

shopping bag from the high-end British department store Harvey Nichols is the first exhibit, through to two large rooms of new and previously exhibited pieces.

The shopping bag was improvised, and very site-specific — borrowed from the museum staff, who usually use it to store bits and pieces by the information desk. It is now spotlighted in a darkened corridor and followed by a scattering of coins around a plum tree branch (money doesn't grow on trees). From this we can guess that Fujiwara's view of the manufactured March 14 tradition of White Day, where in Japan men are supposed to give a gift in return for having received chocolate on St. Valentine's Day, is ambivalent, at best.

Further in, there is a fan made with currency bills issued by the Japanese army during their occupation of the Philippines. After that, a massive stone sculpture of an eagle that once adorned a Nazi building sits next to an Edo Period (1603-1868) scroll painting, also of an eagle. Across the room from these two historical and culturally weighty pieces are two items of juvenilia that belong to Shino Nomura, the curator — her painting of an African Bongo antelope she once saw at Ueno Zoo as a child, and her mother's rendering of it as a cuddly toy. The last work in the exhibition is his 2015 video piece "Hello," which features the true stories of a European designer and a Mexican trash picker who lost a hand in an accident, both recounting how they found happiness in respect of their massively different circumstances.

For the most part the exhibits were not physically made by the artist, and we are not meant to pore over craftsmanship and the quality of the object. This will turn some people off, but as Nomura eloquently put it: "Art doesn't speak to you unless you ask it something."

Even though each piece has a fairly in-depth back story, their value as artworks has more to do with the opportunity they provide for us to reconsider what we take for granted in the social construction of our different realities. Like French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the revolving door of affect between individual and society, there is structure in Fujiwara's work, but its import and impact is created by the structuring of mental patterns and connections that we create in response to it.

Some visitors will consider Fujiwara's exhibition as "mean." Is it the mockery of "harmless" activities like shopping and the exchange of sweets and chocolates? Why bring up unsavory historical events? Maybe it's the epigrammatic and seemingly cryptic way that the works, and the show as a whole, come across. And then there is the matter of dirtying up the place.

Fujiwara was born and partly educated in Britain, and certainly it's possible to see in his wry take on consumer rituals an echo of the fairly scathing view of life in Japan in the late 1980s and '90s by British photographers Paul Graham and Martin Parr. Graham photographed bubble-era office women emphasizing their tortured hairstyles and nervous hand gestures, and Parr captured greasy-haired and bald-patch-threatened heads of exhausted businessmen asleep on trains.

At one level Fujiwara is probably carrying on a certain tradition of British humor, which, as George Mikes in his 1946 book "How to be an Alien" affectionately pointed out, Brits are just as likely to use to ridicule themselves. At another, you could say "serious" level, "White Day" sets up a scenario in which we can test our imagination and perception of objects, behavior, history and narratives; you could spend all day in this exhibition doing a variety of mental workouts, and to me this is the measure of good art.

It's quite cutting at times, but the cut is to separate us from lazy thinking and lazy feelings. As the "Hello" video indicates, Fujiwara challenges us to find our own way to make things work and not settle for received wisdom about how to behave. This isn't meanness, it's rigor.

To put it another way, as contemporary American philosopher Sheryl Crow asks, "If it makes you happy, then why the hell are you so sad?"

"Simon Fujiwara: White Day" at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery runs until March 27; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. (Fri. and Sat. until 8 p.m. ¥1,200. Closed Mon. www.operacity.jp/ag)
