

Rush, Michael, "Video Dreams: Hiraki Sawa," *Art in America*, March 2011.

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VIDEO DREAMS



HIRAKI  
SAWA

Countering the Japanese cult of cuteness and superficiality, Sawa produces poignant videos that probe landscapes, interiors and, above all, the inner self.

BY MICHAEL RUSH

HIRAKI SAWA SEEMS to have missed the memo containing Takashi Murakami's *Super Flat Manifesto*. Issued in 2000 by the godfather of the manga-crazed contemporary Japanese art scene, the document emphasizes the inherent superficiality (physical and mental) of the television images, computer graphics, comic books, video games and billboards then being widely used as source material for art. Within a couple of years, riding this wave into exhibitions worldwide, several practitioners, including Yoshitomo Nara, Shigeoyoshi Ohi, and the artist known as "Mr.," became synonymous with the "cuteness" of a Japanese pop culture trying to lose the horrors and stigmas of World War II. Despite the dark underpinnings of some of the images, a soupy, pink-infused optimism ruled the day.

In London, meanwhile, Sawa was sequestered in his flat making dreamy, silent videos that had more in common with the haunting photos of Hiroshi Sugimoto and the stark films of Hiroshi Teshigahara (*Woman in the Dunes*, 1964) than with the hyper-glossy sculptures of big-busted warriorettes and oversized toys produced by Murakami's studio.

Sawa, born in the city of Kanazawa, Japan, in 1977, left home in 1997 to study art at the University of East London, eventually

Hiraki Sawa: *Dwelling*, 2002, single-channel video, approx. 9½ minutes. All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Hiraki Sawa's exhibition at James Cohan, New York, through Mar. 26.

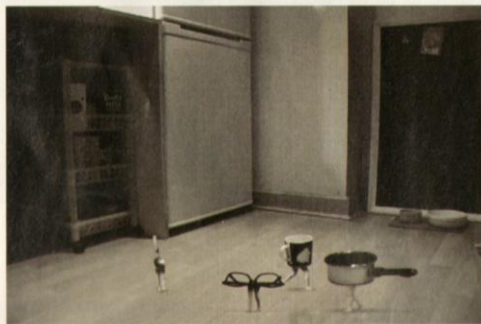
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earning an MFA from the Slade School of Art at University College London in 2003. *Dwelling*, which he made in 2002 while still a student, is a black-and-white video featuring multiple airplanes magically taking off from common surfaces (kitchen table, tile floor, bed) in a nondescript London apartment (his own). The work caused a sensation when it was first shown in exhibitions in London and New York—a quiet sensation, that is.

All of Sawa's videos, from the earliest single-channel pieces (*Airliner*, 2003; *Elsewhere*, 2003) to his now preferred multichannel installations, are intimate, often hermetic meditations on place and the wonderfully odd activities that can occur in imaginative dimensions. In Sawa's realm, a tree growing out of a table, or a clock—suddenly endowed with legs—walking along a bathroom sink, is as natural as a baby in its crib or a dog on its leash in what we think of as the "real" world. Sawa's masterful use of digital editing, today's equivalent of montage in Eisenstein's time, turns the manipulated universe of this new technology into very familiar territory. The fantastical becomes everyday; the supernatural becomes commonplace. And who's to say they aren't? Sawa remarks that he uses Adobe After Effects to "manipulate the images as tangible objects," treating his animations as sculpture.<sup>1</sup>

Sawa's antecedents range as far afield as Alfred Hitchcock and Busby Berkeley; John Ford and Edward Weston; Eadweard Muybridge and the wizards at Pixar. But the artist's own unconscious seems responsible for some of the scarier elements in his care-

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fully modulated scenarios. His Hitchcockian touches are merely teases. He seduces with the ominous, but delivers the fantastical. The opening shots of the black-and-white *Elsewhere*, with the camera lingering on an apartment building stairwell, recall the terrifying site of the detective's slow walk toward death in *Psycho*. Once viewers are inside the apartment, however, a teakettle, potted plant, coffee cup and even a roll of toilet paper all sprout legs and

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start prancing about the rooms. Though this narrative may sound a bit sophomoric (and maybe it is: Sawa was just out of school), the precision of the animations, the sharp attention to lighting and the unapologetic trickery of the artist's digital manipulations make for a visually satisfying romp, which, at little more than seven minutes, seems just lengthy enough for this type of playful exercise. The Surrealist overtones in these videos recall the films of Man

Above, stills from *Going Places Sitting Down*, 2004, 3-channel video projection, approx. 8½-minute loop.

Far left, two stills from *Elsewhere*, 2003, single-channel video, approx. 7½ minutes.

## THE MULTISCREEN O TAKES SAWA FAR FROM THE CLOISTERED INTERIORS OF HIS EARLY WORK INTO THE VAST EXPANSE OF AUSTRALIA'S DESERT.

Ray, particularly *L'Etoile de Mer* (1928), in which a starfish assumes center stage in a manner matched by Sawa's airplanes or walking trees. Man Ray's description of a few of his films as "cinépoèmes" is apt for Sawa's as well.

SAWA'S JOURNEY FROM SILENT VIDEOS to sound took place in 2004, with the three-channel color work *Going Places Sitting Down*. So far, the minimalistic Sawa has not yet employed dialogue, only Cage-like scores that incorporate ambient noise. The interior this time is a more fully furnished, "proper" apartment with lush couches, downy beds and a fluffy white rug. A miniature rocking horse starts moving on its own and glides through the silky hair of the rug, across the bed and then into a waiting tub, where it multiplies into many horses rocking endlessly in an ocean of tiny calm waves. All the while, the repetitive grinding of a record player's needle, stuck at the end of an LP, grows gently louder and louder.

Sawa's manipulations of scale seem fostered by a child's view of the world: the rocking chair is enormous; the kettle is unreachable way up on the stove. The camera favors this distant and wondering POV. But unlike Proust dolefully longing for a childhood lost, Sawa is anything but nostalgic. His videos are less like memory-scapes than fanciful moments in a child's daydreams—the child being a 30-something artist closely in touch with his inner boy.

The aircraft that appear in several of the early works certainly hark back to Sawa's childhood, when his grandmother would take him to the small local airport to see the planes come and go. In 2004, before shooting *Going Places Sitting Down* (planes show up briefly on its left screen), he underwent a bewildering, self-imposed confinement in his apartment. Release came after he worked with a group of children at London's Hayward Gallery, seeing their eager and innocent renderings of spaceships (one was a flying school bus). "The children have amazing imaginations," Sawa says, "yet the imagination wasn't only fantasy. They unconsciously connect their realities to their fantasies. They taught me how to think."

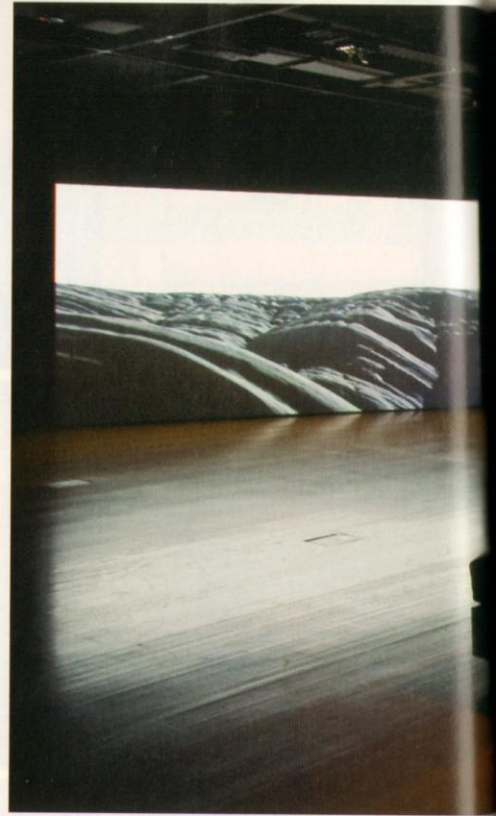
SAWA'S MOST RECENT WORKS enter the risky territory of the multiscreen projection. "Multi-" here means five, six, seven screens, not just two or three. Few artists have pulled this off successfully, but those who do are truly ushering in a new cinema: Bill Viola (*Going Forth by Day*, 2002), Julian Rosefeldt (*Asylum*, 2001-02), Yang Fudong (*Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, 2003-07), Isaac Julien (*Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010).

*Hako* (2007), a six-channel installation, is Sawa at his most surreal and enigmatic. In this work, the child is, in effect, growing up—and his dreams are mixed with nightmares. Electric wires appear against the skyline, birds ascend into a gray void, a lavalike beach of black, coagulated sand

<sup>1</sup> All Sawa statements, unless otherwise noted, from e-mails to the author, December 2010.

Work by Hiraki Sawa will be included in the group show "Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art" at the Japan Society, New York, Mar. 18-June 12.

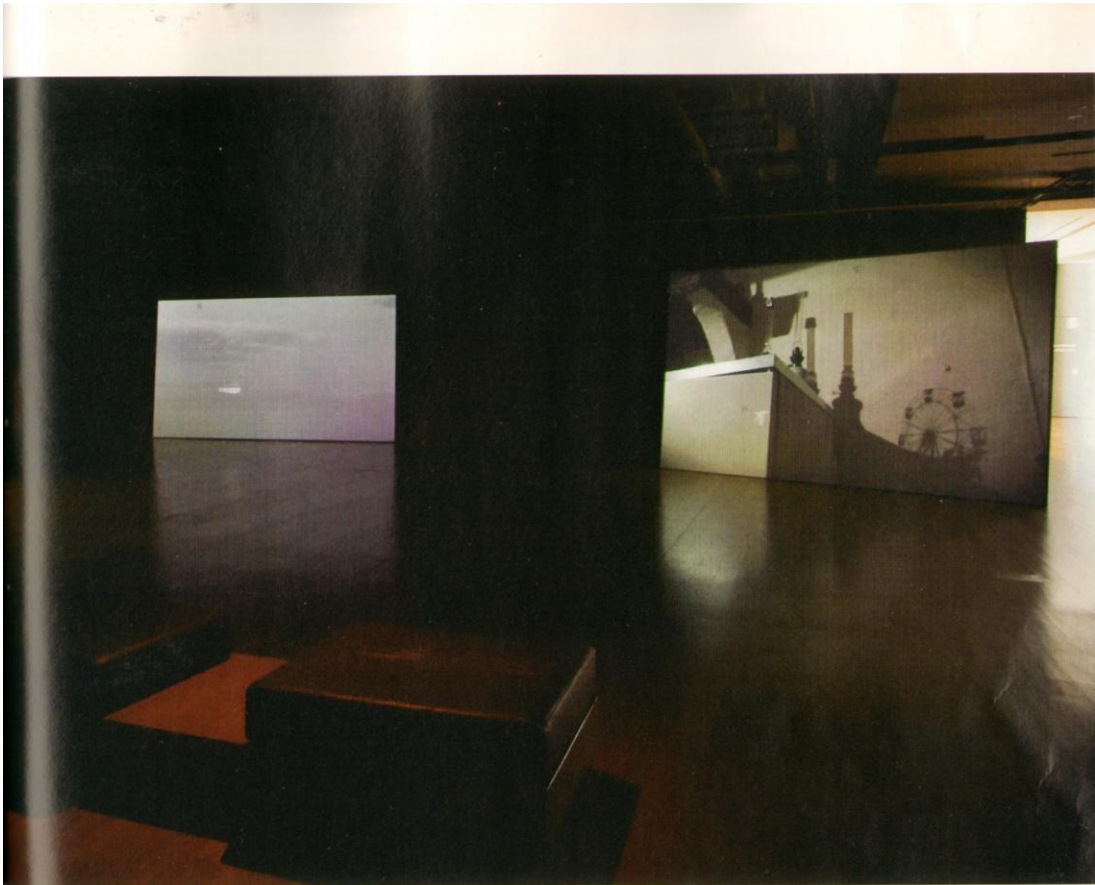
**MICHAEL RUSH** is director of the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, East Lansing.



defies any humans to tread on it. The slow-moving camera pans across an abandoned house: a staircase appears as if ripped from a Joseph Cornell collage; a chandelier hangs precariously from a cracked ceiling; most walls are absent. Predictably (for those familiar with Sawa) a tree pushes up from the ground, instantly grows legs and begins to race along the barren seashore. On one screen stands a clock, stuck for long moments at 8:04; but it eventually moves: 4:15, 4:19. Another screen shows a colorful forest with moss-covered trees; elsewhere, we see an ominous room (prison cell?) containing a long wooden table, with shadows cast by afternoon sunlight that struggles through a lone window. A Ferris wheel, whatever it's doing on the otherwise empty beach, rotates, peopleless, just as it did in *Going Places Sitting Down*.

Sawa reports that he filmed some of these scenes near a nuclear power plant not far from his hometown. He also says that he was inspired by the therapeutic techniques of the late Swiss analyst Dora M. Kalf, who had children and adults explore their psychological issues in a sandbox (*hako* means "box" in Japanese) populated by small

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View of *O*, 2009, 3-channel video installation with monitors and spinning speakers, approx. 8½ minutes. Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia.

figures that the clients were free to manipulate into various revealing relationships. But knowledge of this quaint Jung-inspired exercise adds little to our enjoyment of Sawa's penetrating images. It is tempting to see post-nuclear devastation in the remnants of the house on the beach, or to imagine the moment a bomb dropped immortalized in the stillness of the clock, or, in some of the artist's other films, to see a hint of 9/11 in the mysterious scattering of airplanes. Yet Sawa's work draws strength precisely from its nonspecificity, from its openness to multiple interpretations.

The artist's latest piece, *O* (2009), is a meditation on circularity. "I like circles," Sawa says in an artist statement accompanying his current show at James Cohan in New York. "The Ferris wheel, the rocking horse, the aircraft all describe a slow and steady journey from one place to another and back again." Commissioned for the 2009 Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, *O* takes Sawa far from the cloistered interiors of his early work into the vast expanse of Australia's desert near the town of Alice Springs. Three screens, tilted at acute angles in a single room, show various projections: the desert, seen in magnificent wide-angle shots of land and sky; a body of water with boats silhouetted under a protective moon; an abandoned house conveying a peculiar strength amid some of Sawa's signature motifs—Ferris

wheels, migrating birds and anxiously shaking trees. Adding psychological turbulence to the scene are 10 small, wall-mounted monitors, each featuring different objects (tops, bottles, lightbulbs) spinning manically in space. In like manner, five speakers spiral furiously about on the floor, emitting a soundtrack of mechanical noises created by Sawa and edited by musician Dale Berning. The artist explains:

I made objects spin like you might spin a coin, and recorded the sounds they made as they banged against things and slowly came to a natural stop on both wooden and carpeted floors. I used a number of different melodic spinning tops (some of which play chords and harmonies), a few Pakistani glass bracelets, two metal milk jugs, some lightbulbs. . . . These sounds are combined with parts of a session with Organ Octet on electric chord organs, improvising around chord sequences taken from the first movement of John Cage's *Suite for Toy Piano*. We were recording at midnight in the studio, which is on a market street near a railtrack.

The sounds form a haunting aural backdrop for the collision of images on the multiple screens. With *O*, Sawa has leapt into a genuinely multimedia arena. He is not stepping gingerly from his small London flat. He's bursting out, a bit unhinged, into a wildly complex and impossibly intimate new world. ○

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