



CURATORIAL ESSAY
GOOD INTENTIONS
ANN MACDONALD



Jon Sasaki, *Free Sno-Kones*, 2010.

Jon Sasaki, the artist, accepts and celebrates the reality of his current situation; in contrast, his insouciant Everyman persona is filled with an endless desire for transcendence. The will to persist in the face of adversity is a marker of Jon's persona. Sasaki, a romantic-conceptualist, creates scenarios that are rife with opportunity for failure. A deep-rooted insistence on finding the bright side becomes a courageous (or foolhardy) act of revolution. The promise of a better day is just around the corner, a mindset that anyone engaged in artistic production must embrace, even if only momentarily. Sasaki's presentation of reality elicits empathy, and our hearts may be torn between the charm of the naive player and our own ability to recognize a situation destined to be pathetic. During his *Good Intentions* exhibition at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Jon enthusiastically offered us Free sno-kones! (via Nork, the repurposed snowman mascot of the former City of North York) in the middle of a January snowstorm. We were putty in his hands, charmed by the ridiculousness of the offer. Sasaki may want us to scoff, but his audience was unilaterally onside with the preposterous idea. Even the most jaded university students lined up like giddy schoolchildren to select their favourite syrup, and licked their lips as artificial fruit flavours soaked through the shredded ice. Attendance at the exhibition skyrocketed.

The trope of "self-othering" enables an artist greater freedom to explore different narratives under an assumed or hybridized identity. Through his Everyman character, or even more

dramatically through the use of a contingent of mascots—whose purpose is to bring luck to a labelled, collective identity—Sasaki can joyfully play both sides. He becomes a trickster who breaks the rules of the gods or nature, sometimes maliciously but usually, albeit unintentionally, with positive effects. Throughout the ages, tricksters have been either cunning or foolish or both—Sasaki cunningly plays at being foolish through the actions of his alter ego. His (and his alter ego's) antics cause viewers to consider their position in terms of sensitivity and empathy. Sasaki toys with the humanizing emotions: compassion, sentimentality, empathy, love and social optimism.

Flyguy Triggering His Own Motion Sensor (2010) is a dancing inflatable, typically seen at used-car lots or fast-food restaurants. Sasaki has placed Flyguy tenuously in control of his own movement through the installation of a motion sensor. If Flyguy stops moving, he will cut his own power source and fall limply to the floor. This scene is made even more tragic/comedic since the fan that is meant to keep him inflated and dancing euphorically does not have the torque to keep him fully erect. Flyguy is condemned to struggle and bend, sweeping the gallery floor with his drooping hair and fingers. Throughout his travails, he displays a cheery grin and bright, excited eyes. This display of Sisyphean failure elicits a heartfelt response and an urge to step in and offer assistance. Gallery goers are deeply tempted to break the "Do not touch the art" rule and try to prop him up. Witnessing Flyguy's suffering and absence of dignity creates

a moral demand on the body to respond with compassion, as an earnest expression of human attachment. But Sasaki does not leave us sitting in this moment of helplessness, overwhelmed by the sight of ongoing suffering. Mark Twain's adage "Humour is tragedy plus time" comes to bear as, only seconds later, viewers may find some emotional distance and locate the comedic as they personally identify with Flyguy's interminable hope and effort. Through his facial features especially, Flyguy is personified, and as Henri Bergson points out in his essay *Laughter*, "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human." [1]

In the same text, Bergson identifies two more fundamental observations about the conditions whereby the comical may be received: he describes the "absence of feeling which accompanies laughter," and posits that "the comic's effect cannot be produced without falling on a surface that is thoroughly calm and unruffled." He goes so far as to describe "a momentary anesthesia of the heart" because "its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple." [2] The final observation Bergson makes is that "laughter implies complicity with others and must have a social signification." [3]

Jon Sasaki's *Best Friendship* (2006, ongoing) is a sincere offer of the artist's lifelong best-friendship, as well as a sterling-silver half-heart pendant. Sasaki promises to always wear his half of the necklace as evidence of his deep commitment to the purchaser. The success of the project created problems for the artist and, in an update, he reported with a wrinkled nose, "I stopped wearing them because they were scratchy." [4] Good intentions are meant to be as they claim to be; one tries not to consider that their effects may disappoint.

Here, one is also reminded of David Hammons hawking snowballs with *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), in proximity to other street vendors in a wintry downtown Manhattan. The performance piece is a marvellous commentary on excessive wealth, commodity exchange and the promised satisfaction of ownership—especially within the art market. The outcome of Sasaki's promised fidelity is a Chaplinesque heroic deed gone wrong, providing a real lesson in the foibles of human relationships.

In *The Destination and the Journey* (2007), the protagonist has embarked upon a road trip, taking him through the countryside and into unfamiliar terrain. The notion of a journey is associated with the Romantic tradition as the player becomes aware of self as humbled and insignificant



Jon Sasaki, *Human Statue of the Spirit of Individualism*, 2010.

in relation to the vastness of the sublime landscape. In *Destination*, however, the driver is most concerned with arriving according to the directions on a map. Here the journey is demoted to function, and the driver holds the map in front of his face as he travels, obscuring his vision. Witnessing these actions causes one to cringe, just as does a Hollywood movie where the driver talks incessantly to his passenger, barely looking at the road.

The work is reminiscent of Rodney Graham's *Halcion Sleep* (1994), a 26-minute video loop in which the drugged artist is snuggled in pyjamas in the back seat of a van that traverses Vancouver

in the dark of night. The city is experienced through the rain-streaked windows of the vehicle as Graham sleeps soundly, regressing to an early memory of slumbering in the back of a car as his parents drove him home. Graham took a dose of Halcion so as to induce a regression to this ideal childhood moment. He is dreamily oblivious, putting himself into the hands of another as the vehicle traverses the city. Where Graham's character has handed over the will to control, Sasaki's resembles a Type A personality who will get the job done, oblivious to the fact that he is jeopardizing personal safety and possibly derailing the original intention. Here is always somewhere else.

In *Ladder Stack* (2009), the artist employs multiple ladders to overcome a high wall. His actions are methodical, confident and almost lucid. He utilizes the simulacral self to masquerade as a problem solver. Sasaki uses his body and its vulnerability to connect his quixotic Everyman with the collective audience. The division between body and space is lessened as the viewer envisions potential harm. He has chosen a particular course of action and we are denied the opportunity to change fate. Unlike Bas Jan Ader's *Broken Fall (Organic)* (1971), we do not see gravity take its effect on the lone player; the tension remains as the video loops, and the Everyman continues to climb. We are not granted closure or a moral to the story.

However, *Human Statue of the Spirit of Individualism* (2010) provides opportunity for audience intervention. At the American Adventure Pavillion at Disney's Epcot Center, there are twelve life-size statues representing elements of the Spirit of America—Spirits of Knowledge (a teacher), Freedom (a pilgrim), and so on. The Spirit of Individualism is represented by a manly cowboy holding his saddle at his side and stoically looking to the horizon. He appears to have had a long but satisfying day on the open range. During his exhibition at the Doris McCarthy Gallery, Sasaki collaborated with students on the *Human Statue of the Spirit of Individualism* performance piece. He fabricated a plinth exactly like the one at Epcot, faithfully recreated the cowboy costume and requested that the student performers strike, and motionlessly hold, the pose of the heroic cowboy. The physical endurance displayed by each student was astounding. By the time the performers had concluded their shifts, their muscles had stiffened to the point that they required assistance to step down from the plinth. Still eager to be true to their performance as statues, they attempted subtlety in their requests for assistance. Perhaps momentarily widened eyes would be the clue to

anyone near enough and alert enough to help the performer out of his or her predicament. Gracefully and reciprocally, interdependence came into play.

Sasaki tackles the great Canadian Romantic narratives of the untamed North and the Group of Seven in the video *Jack Pine, 8' Camera Crane* (2010). He visited a location near Canoe Lake in Algonquin Park—the site of several classic Tom Thomson paintings, as well as the place where Thomson reportedly drowned during a canoe trip. The emotive qualities of oil paint are missing as Jon's camera crane rotates and awkwardly bumps up against the branches, and we hear the rumble of a motorboat in the distance. A commemorative plaque and even a park bench are present to make the "wilderness" a little more accessible. In the Art Gallery of Ontario's installation of *Jack Pine, 8' Camera Crane* Sasaki included an office water cooler filled with water from the famous lake. A harsh warning sign was placed on the wall next to the cooler, cautioning any partakers about harmful bacteria, protozoa, parasites, toxins and viruses. What a grand romantic gesture—to swallow the water that swallowed Thomson. This is on a scale nearing the erotic obsession with saints and their relics; even acquiring Giardiasis (or beaver fever) is part of the great Canadian mythology.

It is perhaps in *Crossroads* (2010) where Sasaki's ironic disillusionment peaks. The video is shot at the Mississippi crossroads where another cultural icon—blues legend Robert Johnson—sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his extraordinary guitar skills.

The term crossroads metaphorically relates to the place where the physical and the abstract meet. It implies a moment of critical and significant choice. However, in Sasaki's video, the wanderer roams aimlessly for fifty-one minutes (off-camera), never quite focusing on one thing or achieving a moment of definition. The camera pans a gas station, fast-food joints and broken signs, scanning the general lack of monumentality. Street lights shine ruthlessly in the night, and the overall effect on the viewer is a slight feeling of nausea. It is difficult to believe that the talent of one of the most influential and passionate musician/songwriters is said to have been birthed here.

Albert Murray describes the spirit of the blues as being "not only about what is threatened but [about] the very part of you that is assumed to be the most vulnerable. For what is ultimately at stake is morale, which to say the will to persevere, the disposition to persist and perhaps prevail; and



Jon Sasaki, *Ladder Stack*, video still, 2009.

what must be avoided by all means is a failure of the nerve.”[5] In *Crossroads*, the protagonist, hopelessly without direction, drags the viewer along on his aimless and seemingly despondent rove. Paradoxically, enduring this video induces an intense feeling of restlessness and an inversion of experience that creates an active yearning to set one’s self free from limits imposed, evoking Murray’s definition.

The complexity of Sasaki’s work is generated through his mining of meaningful opportunities to discover the sweet benefits of futility. The artist offers us moments to see our pompositives by alluding to mishaps and by exposing our yearnings. That he often presents a lone character intensifies the need to acknowledge our shared humanity. At times heart-wrenching, the work is always infused with optimism and humour.

ENDNOTES

1. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1911, p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
4. Conversation with the artist, 2009.
5. Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 1989, p. 47.

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COVER IMAGE: Jon Sasaki, *Flyguy Triggering His Own Motion Sensor*, 2010.

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