

ERIC SWANSON

ZACH MENDEZ



ART CAPER: Using digital tools, Oakland-based artist Kota Ezawa plays with the familiar trope of art theft in a new way. "The Crime of Art" (pictured).

KOTA EZAWA: THE CRIME OF ART

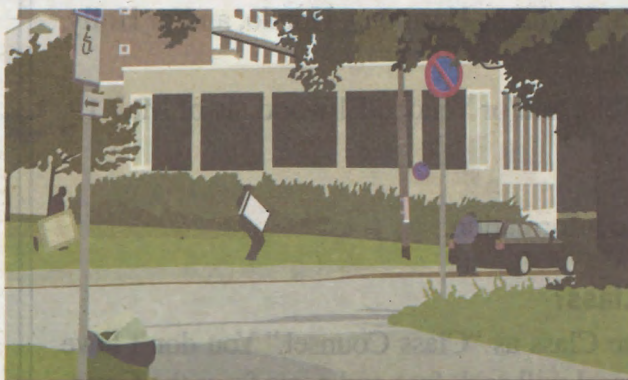
MCA SANTA BARBARA SHOWS DIGITAL TAKES ON STOLEN MASTERPIECES

By now we are used to the glamorization of art theft in the movies, where big stars often play the clever criminal, and the entire operation is understood sympathetically as a "caper." In a fascinating exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, Oakland-based artist Kota Ezawa plays with this familiar trope in a new way, bringing his skill with digital tools to bear not only on the history of art theft and art vandalism in the 20th century but also on the more nebulous concept that gives the show its title: *The Crime of Art*.

Using a digital tablet and stylus, Ezawa creates renderings of stolen or vandalized masterpieces for a variety of media, but primarily the light box. The galleries at the MCASB have been carefully prepared to produce the maximum possible impact for these glowing jewels and the additional animated videos that accompany them. Although each work is simplified by the process out of necessity, Ezawa's remarkable commitment to the aesthetic integrity of his adaptations renders his flattened copies of intense interest in their own right. He clearly must solve complex problems with color and tone in order to achieve these glowing results.

The main suite of works on display in light-box form replicates the 13 items stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. This unsolved crime remains the most significant art theft in history. The paintings stolen were valued at \$500 mil-

lion, and due to the unusual nature of the Gardner Museum's exhibition plan, they have not been replaced. Empty frames now hang where these valuable works once were, giving the crime a kind of permanent collection status. Ezawa's versions, which include works by Rembrandt, Degas, Manet, and Vermeer, are clustered together on the large



SCREAM DREAM: Duratrans transparency and an LED light box bring Ezawa's "Munch Theft" (2017) to life.

far wall of the main gallery, shining with the dubious aura of mechanical reproduction.

It would be easy to see the project as an extension of institutional critique, a digital repetition of the gestures made by such pioneers of the genre as Hans Haacke, who sought to expose the complicity between the art world and the robber barons and corporate entities whose homes and headquarters often house great masterpieces. Yet the experience of the show leads to a different conclusion. In a pair of elegant video projections, "City of Nature" and "The Crime of Art," that are also on view in this exhibition, Ezawa lets his imagination and his talent

for digital composition run free. The results are irresistible and idiosyncratic. In "City of Nature," the artist has redrawn scenes of nature from Hollywood films and cut them into a looped montage of great beauty. The clichés of sunsets and dappled reflections on moving water dissolve in an altogether new experience that's not exactly natural, but not so digitally determined as to eliminate the reality of its ultimate source.

"The Crime of Art," which gives the show its title, is also the artist's most significant work to date. Employing the same painstaking handmade animation process he once applied to the last three minutes of the O.J. Simpson trial, Ezawa has created an extreme distillation of every art theft movie trope that ever captivated an audience. The split-second timing, hair-raising escapes, visible-laser-beam protection devices, and even the suspension kit from *Mission Impossible* all make an appearance, yet it is the artist's eye for composition, lighting, and detail that lingers in the memory. Ezawa's brilliant handling of the movement of human figures in space gives new life to the films he draws on and leads the viewer to contemplate again, and from a different angle, what happens when art turns criminal.

— Charles Donelan

4-1-1 Kota Ezawa: *The Crime of Art* runs through February 3, 2019, at MCASB, 653 Paseo Nuevo. See mcasantabarbara.org.



Puccini's classic opera played out on the Granada stage.

OPERA SANTA BARBARA'S

LA BOHÈME

Opera Santa Barbara brought Puccini's perennial audience favorite *La bohème* to the Granada stage on Friday, November 9, in a gorgeous and beautifully sung production featuring some of the most exciting performances we've seen from the company. Nathan Granner's electrifying Rodolfo occupied the center of the show's Parisian universe, with Eleni Calenos as his romantic partner and lyrical muse Mimi.

Act One takes place in a single room on the top floor of a cold apartment building, but the story travels a long way within the confines of that small space. From the opening bit of self-referential comedy with the playwright's pages going up in smoke to the rollicking business of bamboozling the landlord Benoit, the happy band of Bohemians showed themselves capable of maintaining their high-spirited charm even when hungry. From there, the plot moves to the wrenching eternity of young love as Mimi enters clutching her candle and calling for a light. It's a perfectly balanced sequence, with all the colors and emotions of young life in the city concentrated to a brilliant point.

Act Two offered a splendid opportunity for Musetta (Elle Valera) and Marcello (Luis Alejandro Orozco) to surf the cresting waves of choral magic woven by the composer in and around the Café Momus. The dazzling set and costumes gave this festive procession an extra spark of life, and the whole act was expertly choreographed for maximum impact. Acts Three and Four built on this solid foundation with even more vocal fireworks. The quartet involving the two couples was particularly memorable, and by the end, there was no escaping the sense that true love, while tragically endangered, will always thrive wherever young people gather in the city.

— CD