

Lost Treasures, Revisited and Repurposed

FAMED ARTWORKS STOLEN IN 1990 BECOME THE THEMATIC FODDER AND FUEL FOR PHILOSOPHICAL PROVOCATION IN THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SANTA BARBARA SHOW "KOTA EZAWA: THE CRIME OF ART."

By Josef Woodard
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"Kota Ezawa: The Crime of Art"

When: through February 3, 2019
Where: Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, 653 Paseo Nuevo
Hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Thursday
Information: 966-5373, www.mcasantabarbara.org

News flash: missing masterpieces, by the likes of Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Manet, have landed in downtown Santa Barbara. Well, they have landed in purposefully altered and simplified form, courtesy of artist Kota Ezawa's crafty invention of an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa



"Self Portrait with Black Beret and Gold Chain," Kota Ezawa

Barbara, "The Crime of Art," an eccentric charmer of a show which teases the eye and mind, while raising questions about the commerce of art, art history theft as an aesthetic, and mock-noirish crime legacy-keeping.

The San Francisco-based artist has cleverly drawn on the



"Empty Frame," Kota Ezawa

media of light boxes and video animations to bring crude, cartoony facsimiles of such paintings as Vermeer's "The Concert," "Le Sortie du Passage" by Degas, Manet's "Chez Tortini," and Rembrandt's "The Storm in the Sea of Galilee." All these paintings were brazenly stolen in 1990, from Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and remain "at large," despite a \$10 million reward offered by the museum.

Fittingly enough, these famed art historicized images of old are compactly gathered in a centerpiece work in the exhibition, simply called "Gardner Museum Revisited." Other imagery in the show both supports the external facts of the theft and the potential underlying messages surrounding the criminal act and the artist's own inventive response thereto.

Besmirched and defaced portraits—"Portrait of Archduke Albrecht" and "Self-Portrait with Black Beret and Gold Chain"—have been splashed and spattered with paint, as if desecrated by vandals in the temple of art. "Empty Frame" depicts an art museum wall with two intact

paintings flanking a depressingly vacant, gilded frame.

Cagily, the artist also plays into our natural intrigue with the machinations of the crime at hand: the show could be subtitled "The Art of Crime." To that end, the looping title-piece video "The Crime of Art," projected in a large format in a separate side gallery, lavishes us with specific—yet, significantly, also ambiguous—scenes of a museum heist.

A signature image from the show, "Munch Theft" is an isolated image of masked men toting what we presume are masterpiece paintings towards a humble hatchback car, and the animated "Double Tape" recreates security camera footage of the fateful night at the Museum. We watch, for its nearly six-minutes duration. Nothing much happens, except a growing awareness that we're being played by the artist, who is tapping into our lust for lore about criminal doings, and the trail of evidence.

Crime kitsch aside, the artist's multi-layered trickery of an exhibition also feeds into the notion of art pilferage from an intellectual, artistic angle as well. He transcends the details



"Munch Theft," Kota Ezawa



"Gardner Museum Revisited," Kota Ezawa

of the actual crime presumably in question here and alludes to the institutionally acceptable and wholesale "theft," repurposing, paraphrasing, filming and filtering of art historical models in the continuum of art. Especially in a post-post-modern era, what goes around, comes around, and is fair game for borrowing/stealing again. The point is lost on no one, especially the artist himself, that the cultural life of "crime" circles back to the very art-about-art in this gallery, an aspect which is no small part of the project's beguilement.

Speaking of art news, Mr. Ezawa's show is the first exhibition under the watch of new MCASB director Abaseh Mirvali, after the departure of long-standing director Miki Garcia, who oversaw the evolution of the important local art space through its name change from the original Contemporary Arts Forum (CAF) to its current state and moniker. Her resume includes a variety of prestigious roles in

art around the world, including as executive director of Denver's Biennial of the Americas in 2013. Ms. Mirvali will also oversee a new MCASB space forthcoming in the Funk Zone.



"The Crime of Art," Kota Ezawa



"Double Tape," Kota Ezawa

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