

Midi Onodera

TOO MUCH TIME ON MY HANDS

playtime | inside my head

Midi Onodera's moving-image practice spans over three decades. From Super 8, 16mm, digital video to toy camera formats, her films and videos touch upon a range of subjects and inventive techniques, creating a body of work that is informed by her lived experiences and her artistic roots in experimental film. Speaking to the broader cultural conditions of art and technology, she is never only concerned with what is created within the frame, but how these images might be circulated and consumed, too. In 2006, she began to make what are now known as "vidoodles," short-short videos that run from 30 seconds to two minutes, like a sketch or doodle in video-form. Originally the vidoodles were made and distributed on a daily basis, then over the years they became weeklies, then monthlies, and in more recent years she has been producing annual video projects that explore the politics of language and media in everyday life. Onodera's work consistently draws attention to how the changing and unchanging ways of seeing are always highly charged. The works in this exhibit build upon these time-based methods and concerns, while also pushing them in new and divergent directions.

TOO MUCH TIME ON MY HANDS | *playtime | inside my head*, encompasses two of Onodera's newest ongoing projects. The title of the exhibit refers to the artist's contemplation of time spent during this current moment of the pandemic lockdown and social upheaval, a period in which she finds herself simultaneously looking outward and inward, working with others and working alone.

playtime refers to Onodera's web-based project *EXC-19*, an undertaking based on the game-turned-Surrealist collaborative drawing approach known as "The Exquisite Corpse." *EXC-19* involves individuals taking turns to perform the different roles of video production without communicating to each other during the process or even knowing who is involved. Once the video is complete, Onodera reveals the finished piece and the identities of the participants to each other and the work is posted on a website. Over 100 participants have been involved in Onodera's project and there are over 60 videos. *EXC-19* playfully connects people in a time of physical distancing, generating creativity and levity while also challenging the conventional methods of media art production and decentering industry standards such as director-led filmmaking. In recent months, a number of other COVID-related videos, omnibus projects and

online festivals have emerged. What sets *EXC-19* apart from these endeavors is it is not simply a platform for existing filmmakers to create theme-based work. It is a process of social assembly and inclusivity, bringing together emerging, established, and non-artists alike. Ultimately, *EXC-19* asks us to imagine what is possible when faced with an array of constraints and obstacles.

inside my head refers to Onodera's series of sculptural video consoles, each one containing a single or pair of tiny screens playing videos on loop. Inspired by the shared qualities of daguerreotypes and mobile phones, these are vessels full of memories. Unlike the metallic, slim and sleek aesthetic of the latest mobile devices, though, the exterior of Onodera's consoles are made of white plaster, blue pigment and wax, irregularly shaped with undulating surfaces, resembling marbled ice cream or a cartoon sky on pause. Nearly all the surfaces surrounding the screens are covered in cheerful textiles, often bright and floral, and sometimes a miniature toy accompanies the screen like a Kinder Surprise. Although the outsides of these modules promise sweetness and fun, the insides contain moving-images that speak to various forms of power, domination, and violence.

Most of the videos employ the technique of "found footage," re-contextualizing images gleaned from television shows (*Dallas*, *Romper Room*, *Looney Tunes*, *Mr. Magoo*, *Jonny Quest*, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*), commercials (Virginia Slims, Hanes, Jell-O, Kool-Aid), and individual uploads to YouTube. Through formal manipulations, Onodera reinvigorates familiar cultural images and icons across the TV and Internet eras in order to question their political significance and to generate new and timely meanings. *Hey, Baby*, *Romper, Bomper*, and *Slant Eyes* are stark reminders of the gendered and racialized junctions of belonging, bullying, desire, and discrimination, whereas *Afterimage* presents a more haunting and difficult look at racism and complicity.

In the piece *"I'm gonna..."* the common gesture of a tickle, while often associated with affection and amusement, is fraught with tension here. Over the slow-motioned video of a child being tickled by an adult and the eerie echo of giggles, protests appear dead centre in the form of large, bold text: "ATTACK ON ME," "STOP," "YOU DON'T HEAR ME" (left screen), and "I AM IN YOUR HANDS," "STOP," "I CAN'T BREATHE" (right screen). Like the other videos in this series, text often emerges as a way of talking back to images, complicating them, putting them up for critical reexamination and asking, *where do we see harm?*

Revisiting the past and present images assembled in these videos is to reflect on our own gestures, behaviours, and thoughts in all their complexities, though certain meanings seem

magnified in light of our current reawakening to systemic injustices and anti-black racism. *inside my head* tells us something about how the politics of representation are constantly shifting, albeit not in the typical truism of “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” There is a much more ominous tone at play here. Entering the installation is like encountering a roomful of Pandora’s boxes, yet in this case, Onodera has deftly rearranged the chaos for us, allowing us to open up and hold so much time in our hands.

Although the artist invites us to interact with the work, it is not an entirely easy or enjoyable experience. As Onodera points out, “the boxes are not hinged. The top and bottoms parts don’t fit snugly together. You have to be careful about how you put them together in order to stop the voice and video from continuing to play. I like this because it’s like these thoughts seep into the air/consciousness even if you try and stop them. It can be a physical struggle with the boxes.” Once a box is opened, the construction and the contents of the pieces work together to create an intricate mix of pleasure, puzzlement, and disturbance to be reckoned with, yet Onodera reminds us that “it is up to the viewer to interact with them or not. One can simply look at them as objects and not open them up - just as we can walk through the world and not be impacted by the more challenging social issues such as poverty, racism, etc. It is easier to close your eyes to injustice. It is harder to be a real part of movement forward.”

TOO MUCH TIME ON MY HANDS explores contemporary connections made online and offline, and more importantly, the need for community-building and self-reflection in times of crisis. Where *playtime* expresses a collective organizing that is expansive, multitudinous, and proliferating, *inside my head* expresses a personal and organized collection of ruminations, worries and questions, repeating over and over until one closes the lid again. While *EXC-19* is located solely on the Internet, the plaster boxes are located exclusively in-gallery and only accessible in-person as these were the respective material conditions of their production. This deliberate difference not only illustrates the distinction between online and offline user experiences, it suggests that each type of experience is irreplaceable and both are necessary. Seen together, Onodera’s works in this exhibit call attention to alternative modes of image-making and image-viewing in our current times.

Lesley Loksi Chan

August 2020