

Shimabuku
Contemporary Art Gallery
November 21, 2014 – January 11, 2015

The Contemporary Art Gallery presents the first solo exhibition of work in North America by renowned Japanese artist Shimabuku. A major career moment, this survey follows recent exhibitions in Europe where he is arguably much better known and provides a crucial opportunity for North American audiences to see his work, an important stage in understanding Shimabuku's artistic practice.

The exhibition includes pieces dating back to the mid-1990s, when he first emerged as an artist in Japan, through to presenting a wide variety of more recent pieces for which he has since become internationally celebrated, exemplifying an extraordinary curiosity and freedom of expression. Shimabuku uses installation, video, photography, drawings, sculptural pieces and events alike to convey his intense fascination with the natural world—equally the animal and vegetable realms—and the countless manifestations of human culture within it. His artistic proposition is essentially one of discovery. He encourages us to assume an "alien" identity whereby we break with established habits of perception, and enjoy experiences as if they are happening to us for the first time.

From the beginning, incongruity has characterised much of Shimabuku's work. For example, *Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere* (1994) is a performance (with subsequent photographic documentation) that involves the artist standing by a railway line in Kobe, in the guise of Father Christmas. Instead of sacks of gifts, he is holding blue plastic bags full of rubbish. The gentle surrealism of the image is compelling. Enchanted by the thought that Christmas occurs during the summer months in the southern hemisphere, he hoped to inspire passengers who might catch a fleeting glimpse of him from the train window, with dreams of Christmas in the summertime. In his work Shimabuku is not so interested in discovering the reasons why, instead preoccupied, through a joyful approach, with unions of myth or mystery and the everyday. This is epitomized by *Something that Floats / Something that Sinks* (2008), a work through which the artist draws our attention to the fact that some pieces of fruit and vegetables float in water or appear to swim, while others sink. It is as wonderful as it is seemingly miraculous. Likewise, in later works, we see the artist dressed up as a bear, waiting for days on a park bench with a live octopus, or standing behind a market stall giving away ice cream covered with pepper and salt. Of the latter he explains, "I think cooking and art are similar. They are both about unexpected meetings of far-away ingredients, to create something delicious, something good".

The inversion of the way things are conventionally seen to be is crucial to Shimabuku's practice. He is interested in what is normal being made strange and often picks up the theme of the journey in his work, the means by which difference occurs through translation in both time and space.. The photograph *Cucumber Journey* (2000) commemorates a two week performance travelling slowly north on British canals while learning to pickle vegetables. In his video *Then, I decided to give a tour of Tokyo to the octopus from Akashi* (2000) we see him with an octopus in a fishtank taking a Shinkansen train to Tokyo. There they make touristic visits to the Tokyo Tower and the famous Tsukiji fish market before getting back on the train for a return trip so that the octopus can be submerged again, back home in the Akashi Sea. The artist refers to this work as his Apollo project, involving as it did an adventure far from the natural habitat of the octopus - the fishtank being the equivalent of a spacecraft - isolated from the surrounding atmosphere so that the octopus could survive its voyage into unfamiliarity. We easily imagine how weird our world must have seemed to the octopus whilst being reminded of how "wonderful" such a creature is from our point of view.

The involvement of others, not only in the consumption but also the production of his work, marks Shimabuku out as a major figure in the recent development of relational art practice. Since his early collaborations with other Japanese artists such as Makoto Nomura and Tadasu Takamine, he has produced many events, interventions and performances that are very open to audiences, to the point that they become active participants. *When the Earth Turned to Sea* (2002) requires dozens of volunteers to fly Chinese fish kites, the result is a shoal of fish in the sky - or a flock of fish - and so the world is turned upside down. *Passing through the rubber band* (2000), similarly invites gallery visitors to step through the stretching loops, a simple act of fun and wonder via the most modest of means.

Demonstrating the breadth of Shimabuku's oeuvre, works reveal an essential correspondence to much that is happening elsewhere in a wider art world. At the same time, the exhibition insists on our grasp of the continuity that exists between art and (non-art) life. Its unpretentiousness is refreshing, and leads us to the conclusion that he is one of the most radical and engaging artists of our times.

The exhibition forms a loose allegiance and is complementary to recent survey exhibitions in Europe, namely *Something That Floats, Something That Sinks*, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, July 24 - September 15, 2013, and *Flying Me*, Kunsthalle Bern, April 4 - May 25, 2014.