



HIRAKI SAWA

## going places sitting down

*No sooner is an image presented as art than, by this very act, a new frame of reference is created which it cannot escape. It becomes part of an institution as surely as does the toy in the nursery.*

—E.H. Gombrich

*To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.*

—William Blake

*Auguries of Innocence*

Hiraki Sawa's three-channel digital animation *Going Places Sitting Down*, 2005, is a self-enclosed poetic dreamscape infused with melancholy and delight. The setting is an English bourgeois domestic interior. A child's rocking horse found in the nursery is digitally animated and transported to appear in changing proportions rocking back and forth in various surroundings throughout the three-video montage. A rocking horse can move, but only in a child's imagination does it go anywhere. However, in just over eight and a half minutes Sawa, a modern-day Jonathan Swift, takes the viewer on a journey where objects and environments shift in size and scale, making new connections frame by frame.



**Going Places Sitting Down**, 2005

Still from three-channel video projection with sound, 8:40 loop, edition of 6  
Commissioned by the Hayward/Bloomberg Artists' Commission  
Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York

In the opening sequence we see a window, which is our means as voyeurs and voyagers to drop into a non-linear narrative, a storyline that resists structure but is contained, that is grounded but celestial. Throughout *Going Places Sitting Down* the soundtrack's repetitive tones, which tinkle like wind chimes or a music box, are disrupted periodically by ambient sounds such as a dripping faucet or by pauses that thwart a melody, defy a beginning, middle, or end to the composition, and reinforce the non-linearity of the visual narrative. A piano appears in one scene. In another, rocking horses seesaw on the ivory keys. Sound and image are interwoven throughout the work in the way that music and theater come together in opera, but Sawa and his musical collaborator opt for understatement rather than heightened dramatic effect.

The central panel is devoted to a tracking shot that moves from room to room. The camera holds a constant mid-range position on the domestic interior and pans steadily from room to room, catching purloined details that are periodically enlarged on the side panels. Sawa shows us that imagination is what allows us to transcend the confines of time, history, and space. In his diaries *Journey around My Room*, the French soldier Xavier de Maistre (1763–1852), demonstrates how solitude leads to an examination of what is inside and outside, what constitutes our immediate environment and what lies beyond. While under house arrest for forty-two days as punishment for dueling, de Maistre devoted himself to close examination of his environment exploring as tourist sites his bed, his armchair, the artworks on the wall, and his small library. He pondered his relationship with his valet. He observed that focus makes things strange—what is close becomes invisible, leading the imagination in unpredictable directions, into the interior where mind and body diverge. De Maistre's metaphysical wanderings are not unique. What he discovers for



himself is the simple pleasures within his grasp and that even pedestrian objects and ordinary activities possess meaning and purpose and give satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> Sawa provides a similar journey through an interior space that looks closely at the overlooked, bringing attention to material presence as well as worlds within.

In contrast to the single-mindedness of the central panel of *Going Places Sitting Down*, the side panels exhibit a series of incongruous environments or situations where textures and fluids are juxtaposed in discordant yet pacific realms. Rocking horses bob like seahorses in a majestic sea confined to a bathroom sink. Water, a natural enemy of paper, flows rhythmically by leather-bound books that rise like palisades, dwarfing the small boats passing below in full sail. Above the literary cliffs a camel transports a rider across a carpeted terrain into a world of displacement and substitution. These curious juxtapositions mirror dream work where fears and desires are manifested in symbolic terms.

The rocking horse is the recurring image and the unifying metaphor among the three screens. It keeps time like a metronome, rocking back and forth in the foreground in one scene and then appearing miniaturized and on the mantel in the next, only to reappear doubled and redoubled in number in a subsequent sequence. What is the meaning of this horse with no rider? Why does it grow and shrink like Alice did when she fell down the rabbit hole?

E.H. Gombrich observed that a child has no trouble making the imaginative leap from a real horse to a hobbyhorse or even a broomstick. If it can be straddled, it is a satisfactory stand-in or abstraction of reality for little boys as well as little girls.<sup>2</sup> Deborah Bright concurs with Anna Freud, who claims that the female horse craze “betrays either [the female’s] primitive autoerotic desires (in the rhythmic movement of the horse); or her identification with the mother (if she enjoys caring for the horse); or her phallic sublimations (if her ambition is to master the horse and train it).” Bright adds that males also go through horsey phases from their days on a hobbyhorse to powerful iterations of leading cavalry charges, roping cattle, and playing polo. Horses may be symbols of power (sexual or otherwise) for both sexes. Depictions of horses without riders tend to idealize the animal’s grace and beauty.<sup>3</sup> Sawa leaves the meaning of the rocking horse ambiguous. The back and forth movement is implicitly erotic, but does the artist reject the theory of infantile sexuality or embrace it? Is he saying that all fantasies, including the one he has created, are sexual in nature?

Movement in *Going Places Sitting Down* is consistently and soothingly slow, calm, and quiet. Occasionally the familiar image of a camel, elephant, or bird ambles across the



### Going Places

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screen. In Sawa's early black-and-white videos, the artist brings to life stills from the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), giving them shadows and sending them on journeys around his apartment. Marcel Duchamp and Sol LeWitt found in Muybridge's repetition ways to imbue pictorial space and static forms with duration.<sup>4</sup> Sawa too is concerned with time, especially the time suggested by the interstices between images, voids not perceived on first examination.<sup>5</sup> In her careful research of Muybridge's motion studies Marta Braun observes that the photographer's images are often not in sequence because either not every intended image was useable or one of the multiple cameras that had been set up to capture successive motion had failed. She contends that what Muybridge published were constructed narratives of motion portraying visible and invisible movements.<sup>6</sup> By animating these static forms Sawa fills in the gaps that otherwise escape our awareness.

Sitting in Sawa's apartment, the *mise-en-scène* of the artist's early work, one is immediately aware of the interior life of the artist. Model airplanes that appear in *Going Places Sitting Down* as well as in several of Sawa's early videos have lost their sonic powers. Sitting on shelves they allude instead to a child's fantasy of his toys coming to life at night after the lights are off and the adults are asleep. A native of Japan, Sawa is a 2003 graduate of the Slade School of

Fine Art, University of London. For all his worldliness Sawa remains in touch with the innocent personification of play. His whimsical view of his own surroundings demonstrates how the means of representation used in play can be analogous to that of dreams and wish fulfillment.<sup>7</sup>

Freud tells us that we can find the first traces of imaginative activity in the absorbing occupation of a child at play, for a child creates a world of his/her own by rearranging things in a new way that suits him/her better than reality. The child takes the play world seriously but has no trouble distinguishing play from reality or playing in front of others. As adults we abandon play because we are self-conscious playing make-believe in front of others, but our mental life does not give up play easily. Imagination takes over and replaces the pleasure of play with the pleasures of creating fantasies and daydreams. Works of the imagination such as poetry or art, like daydreaming, are continuations of and substitutes for the pleasures derived from play during childhood.<sup>8</sup>

Sawa is part cosmopolite and part gamin. He literally toys with the norms of time and space to defy visual logic. In *Going Places Sitting Down* he takes us on a journey, down a rabbit hole where the unexpected takes place, where growing up, or down, is turned around. When Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll; 1832–1898), the shy Oxford mathematician and amateur photographer, arrives at the end of his story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, he has the heroine's sister wake her. "Oh, I've had such a curious dream!" says Alice. Alice recounts her dream to her sister before running home for tea, to the home of her college professor father, his wife, and their children—one rather like that pictured in *Going Places Sitting Down*. Alice's sister begins to go over Alice's dream in her head. She daydreams about the places she will go and whom she will meet. She then imagines a time

in the future when she and Alice will tell other children about these dreams while longing for their past childhood.<sup>9</sup>

Alice's sister shows us how dream work is layered and contradictory. Our dreams reveal anxieties as well as wish fulfillment. For all the allusions to pleasurable experiences given in *Going Places Sitting Down*, the absence of human interaction is palpable. De Maistre turned isolation into a rewarding and reflective experience. He used his time alone not only to find a new appreciation for the world around him but also to examine the nature of his being and his relationships with others. Alice's sister laments the loss of her childhood while she is still living it just as a mourner suffers a private loneliness while grieving the departed. Photography and, by extension, film and video are linked with melancholy and loss in various ways. They document past moments that cannot be recovered. They hold cherished memories.<sup>10</sup> As each of the three channels of *Going Places Sitting Down* fades to darkness, we are left to ponder what or who is absent. What do we



**Spotter**, 2003  
Still from digital video, 8:20 loop  
edition of 8  
Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York

long for in memory? Sawa takes us around the world in eight and a half minutes. He reminds us of the pleasures of seeing the world through the eyes of a child as well as the wonders of solitude and dreaming.<sup>11</sup>

Susan H. Edwards, Ph.D.  
Executive Director and CEO  
Frist Center for the Visual Arts

Adjunct Associate Professor  
Vanderbilt University

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## Notes

1. Xavier de Maistre, *A Journey around My Room and A Nocturnal Expedition around My Room*, trans, Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Classics, 2004).
2. E.H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1-11.
3. Deborah Bright, "Horse Crazy," *Horse Tales: American Images and Icons, 1800-2000*. Exhibition catalogue, Katonah Museum of Art, 2001.
4. Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows, Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003), 293.
5. Hiraki Sawa, interview with the author, London, March 19, 2005.
6. Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 254.
7. See Melanie Klein, "Personification in the play of children," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 10 (1929): 193-204. Reprinted in Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis, 1921-45* (London: Hogarth, 1948).
8. Sigmund Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming, (1908)" in *Sigmund Freud Collected Papers* Vol. 4 (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959), 173-83.
9. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 95-97.
10. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 81-90.
11. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia (1917)," 152-70. See also Daniel Lagache, "The work of mourning: ethnology and psychoanalysis," in *The Work of Daniel Lagache, Selected Writings* (London: Karnac Books, 1993), 15-29.

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8:40 loop, edition of 6

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## Acknowledgments

Hiraki Sawa's filmic montages are that rare blend of gravitas leavened by wonderment. We thank Hiraki for generously sharing his ideas about the possibilities of imagination and the enchantment within.

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Susan H. Edwards Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
and CEO  
Frist Center for the  
Visual Arts

Kitty McManus Zurko  
Director/Curator  
The College of Wooster  
Art Museum

## Checklist

- \*1. **Elsewhere**, 2003  
digital video on DVD, 7:40 loop  
edition of 8
- \*2. **Spotter**, 2003  
digital video, 8:20 loop  
edition of 8
- 3. **Going Places Sitting Down**, 2005  
three-channel video projection  
with sound, 8:40 loop  
edition of 6  
Commissioned by the  
Hayward/Bloomberg Artists'  
Commission

All works courtesy James Cohan  
Gallery, New York

\**Elsewhere* and *Spotter* included in  
the Frist Center for the Visual Arts  
presentation of *Hiraki Sawa*.

## About the Artist

Hiraki Sawa was born in Ishikawa, Japan in 1977, and lives and works in London, UK. He received a B.F.A. in sculpture in 2000 from the University of East London, and an M.A. in 2003 in sculpture from the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London. The artist has had numerous one-person exhibitions including those at the James Cohan Gallery, New York, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Australia, the Hayward Gallery, London, UK, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., and the U.C.L.A. Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.

He has also participated in several international art fairs including the *Yokohama Triennial*, Yokohama, Japan, *Frieze Art Fair*, Regent's Park, London, UK, and the *Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon*, Lyon France. In 2002, Sawa received an EAST Award at EAST International, Norwich Gallery, Norwich, UK, and his work is represented in the collections of the Museum de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, León, Spain, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan, the Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London, UK, the Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, and The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX.

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## HIRAKI SAWA

August 29–October 22, 2006

**The College of Wooster Art Museum**  
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Wooster, OH

March 2–June 3, 2007

**The Frist Center for the Visual Arts**  
Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery  
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1220 Beall Avenue  
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