

∞Commentary∞

written by Paul Couillard

Sakiko Yamaoka work "Drill+Handmill" in Boston

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Sakiko Yamaoka of Japan also offered us a dichotomy of seemingly contrasting approaches, placing two works, "Handmill" and "Drill" back-to-back. "Handmill" is a poetic, textural work that uses sound (plastic bags rubbed between Yamaoka's palms; a rock drawn across a metal door; small packets of white powder crushed in her fist and poured slowly onto the concrete floor) and image (Yamaoka's solid presence, dressed all in black, set against the delicate cloud of the powder as it pours out from her raised fist) to focus the audience's attention. The physical demands of the piece rest in a sustained insistence on the concentration of one's consciousness in the present moment. Yamaoka calls on her own iron-willed presence to command our attention, pitting her concise gestures against the distractions of room sounds (the building's noisy mechanicals), uncomfortable bodies (too many hours of sitting and standing on raw concrete floors) and head chatter. It is demanding work for all of us.

The second piece, "Drill", begins with a similar aesthetic, as Yamaoka pounds small round bells into a bright red apple. The tapping of the hammer, the occasional jingle of the bells, and the spray of the apple offer a familiar appeal to our now heightened senses. There is a shift, however, when the apple is completely studded, and a very large projection of archetypal (one might say stereotypical) Japanese images covers the wall and floor: images of pre-industrial farming, images of planes and war, Japanese flags, diagrams of exercises or martial arts poses, uniformed students in red and white, weight lifters and gymnasts, lucky cats, manga comics, action figures... Standing in the light of the projection, Yamaoka begins her "drill", counting "one, two, three, four" as she thrusts the jingling apple up and out, to the side, down toward the floor and back. This physically grueling routine continues through two repetitions of the images, the rhythm broken up by ragged pauses as she tries to catch her breath. Finally, partway through a third cycle, she asks the projection to stop. Her action, and the audience's entranced gaze, is unceremoniously broken. The performance is over.



Yamaoka's works invoke the artist's sense of home figuratively, in the sense of a homeland (Drill), and poetically (the 'home' that is our consciousness or awareness, in Handmill). While we cannot hope to grasp the full richness and complexity of those 'homes,' what Yamaoka manages, through her exquisite gestures, is to generate an uncomfortable awareness of our present. We are confronted by the looming proportions of our own resistance, through an illumination of the dynamic relationship between our own 'home'" and that of those around us.