

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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Kota Ezawa

Opus

September 9 – October 30, 2021

Reception: Thursday, September 9, 6:00 - 8:00 pm

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce *Opus*, an exhibition of new work by Oakland-based artist Kota Ezawa. It will be his first solo exhibition at RYAN LEE since joining the gallery roster in 2019. Ezawa is known for translating existing imagery—news footage, film clips, other works of art—into watercolor animations, reimagining well-known historical events or cultural moments as graphic patches of form and color. *Opus* brings together two different architectural interventions that took place in Germany between 1923 and 1989: the creation and destruction of both Kurt Schwitters' seminal installation *Merzbau* (constructed 1923-37; destroyed 1943) and the Berlin Wall (constructed 1961; destroyed 1989). For Ezawa, who was born and raised in Germany but now lives in the United States, these sites—which can only be accessed through mediated imagery, simulacra, and reconstructions—become “ghosts of defining moments in German history (World War II; the Cold War) that haunt Germany to this day.”

The exhibition centers on *THERISEANDFALLOFTHEBERLINWALL*, a two-and-a-half-minute animated video projected onto a freestanding concrete wall. Drawing on widely available newsreel footage, Ezawa selects images to reproduce as watercolors that he then weaves into a condensed animated narrative. In this piece, black-and-white images of the wall's construction are accompanied by a string version of the German national anthem (Joseph Haydn's *Opus 76 No. 3*). When the destruction begins, the visuals switch to color and the soundtrack becomes an ambient remix of Pink Floyd's “Another Brick in the Wall, Pt. 1”, and the sounds of crowd commotion. The soundtrack, particularly the German national anthem, define the work's character and duration. Haydn's melody is juxtaposed with harrowing images of barbed wire, military patrols, and East Berliners' attempts to escape to the West as the wall closes around them. Cheering, chanting, and chiseling add a sense of triumph to the tense images of the wall's dismantling. Through this juxtaposition, Ezawa continues his examination of the relationship between the sanitized nostalgic reverence that national anthems are meant to inspire, and the collective consciousness that shapes national identity, perception, and memory.

Alongside the video projection, Ezawa presents *Merzbau 1, 2, 3*, a series of three LED light boxes that reconstruct the only existing photographs of Kurt Schwitters' ground-breaking installation *Merzbau*. Between 1923 and 1937, Schwitters transformed his studio into an evolving architectural assemblage that became the *Merzbau*. In 1937 Schwitters fled Nazi Germany and his *Merzbau* was destroyed during allied air raids in 1943. Over time Schwitters' total work of art has reached an almost mythical status, and is celebrated as the precursor of much of today's installation art. Its outsized cultural significance and existence via a small set of widely circulated images made *Merzbau* an appealing subject for Ezawa. As he explains, “translating the historic photographs into digital graphics, *Merzbau 1, 2, 3* strips Schwitters' work of its early twentieth century patina and turns it into a timeless composition.”

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The title of the exhibition, *Opus*, refers not only to Haydn's composition, but also serves to mark Ezawa's experience of the pandemic. Begun shortly before the pandemic hit and completed as restrictions were being lifted, these works are a pandemic *opus*, a recording of Ezawa's daily activities. Even though their subject matter is rooted in historic twentieth-century ruptures, they will be forever linked to this unprecedented twenty-first century moment. When taken together, Ezawa explains, the works in *Opus* "tell a story of building, construction, loss and destruction.

While focusing on events that took place in one country over the span of 66 years, these depictions serve as universal symbols of the past, present and future of border walls and avant-garde art."

Kota Ezawa (b. 1969 in Cologne, Germany) is best known for his light-boxes, works on paper and animations that make use of found images, video, and film to comment on contemporary culture, appropriation, and historical events. Described by the artist himself as "moving paintings," Ezawa's works serve as conduits of events for both history and pop culture, translating them into personal memories and experiences. His works have the ability to transcend the specificity of the image into a more universal realm by reducing the forms and content to their most basic elements. He studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and the San Francisco Art Institute before getting his M.F.A. from Stanford University. He lives and works in Oakland, CA.

Ezawa has received a number of fellowships, awards, grants, and residencies, including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award in 2003; a SECA Art Award in 2006 and a Eureka Fellowship in 2010. His work has been included in numerous solo and group exhibitions at Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia (2021), SITE Santa Fe (2017); Metropolitan Museum of Art (2012) and the St. Louis Art Museum (2008). In 2019, his work was included in the Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and in 2017, he was featured in the traveling exhibition *Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything*, organized by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

Ezawa's work is included in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Baltimore Museum of Art, MD; Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, University of California, CA; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; Israel Museum, Israel; J. Paul Getty Museum, CA; Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Germany; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Canada; The Museum of Modern Art, NY; The National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; Netherlands Media Arts Institute, The Netherlands; The Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Art, RI; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY and the Yale University Art Gallery, CT.