

Suggesting the histories of the carnival and the county fair, the contemporary amusement park, corporate theme park and virtual-reality/arcade – Kiyooka's PNE works of 1978 bring forth ideas of location-based entertainment for the masses. This body of work is manifested as a film (here displayed as a video), a slide sequence, and three photo works using images directly from the slide sequence. As with most of Kiyooka's work, it can bring the viewer to a more global discussion through an extremely local set of images, in this case using images of Vancouver's Pacific National Exhibition circa 1978.

In the days before television co-opted the carnival, these ever-moving festivals were the direct descendants of Renaissance street fairs and harvest celebrations, updated with games of chance, shooting galleries, mechanical rides, and the pitshows with a barker and a bally out front. The economic dynamics that inform the electronic midway were developed here."¹

The history of the carnival in North America amalgamates elements of the European street fair with the ancient tradition of the freak show. To name but two, P.T. Barnum's American Museum (a museum of freaks in Manhattan which began in 1840), and Centennial City (which housed freak shows on the periphery of Philadelphia's Centennial Exposition) displayed their "human curiosities" to appeal to the population's lust for the bizarre.² These types of displays became precursors to the sideshows of amusement parks and circuses to come, and in turn for the present state of our media-based entertainment industry. As Susan G. Davis talks about in *R&D for Social Life: Entertainment Retail and the City*, entertainment has evolved from mass public consumption (films, music, sports etc.) into the home (through television) and is now weaving together public and private realms into a borderless space.³ "The city (or at least certain districts of the city), seen as dangerous in its diverse unpredictability, is being made safe imagistically as well as physically."⁴ Gentrification and corporatisation have made cities themselves into consumer-reliant theme parks (like the Disneyfication of Times Square or Nike Town⁵). Just blocks away from the sites of much of Roy Kiyooka's downtown eastside-based street works (close to his home on Keefer Street and his Powell Street studio), we now have Tinseltown. This neon-trimmed monstrosity, housing a huge multiplex, is part of the urban plan to "clean up" lower socio-economic regions. This is an attempt to bring mass culture for middle-to-upper class

(paying) audiences into a region traditionally inhabited by a lower (unable to pay) class.

The division between high culture and vulgarity is clear in the history of entertainment. The sideshow has evolved as a benign tumor on the ass of high culture, as exemplified by the aforementioned Centennial Exposition, and in 1893 in Chicago at the World's Columbian Exposition:

Here was an image that expressed with gnomic concision the future of American culture. On one side of the Columbian Exposition was the Court of Honour... filled with works of serious art gathered from all over the world. On the other side was the midway with George Ferris' towering wheel at its center. The choice was clear: see the best which had been thought and painted, or ride the Ferris Wheel.⁶

The draw of vulgar entertainment, be it in the form of an amusement park ride, eating junk food, or indulging in our culturally induced fascination with the "other", remains an integral part of our lives and is continually becoming more incorporated into every aspect of life. As this happens, a site for the amusement park is no longer necessary; it has crept throughout the postmodern city like a fungus, mushrooming up in any location possible.

Similar to the tradition of the carnival is the more grass-roots institution of the county fair, which was popularized in mid-century rural and suburban communities. It has many elements of the traveling carnival (rides, performances, games), but has traditionally been static and specific to the region in which it occurs. It has the pretenses of selling crafts and regional products and foods, and hosting competitions based on farming and other rural (or "down-home American") events. Often centered around an historical event of the region (like a colonial battle), county fairs often have a theme, and generally have their own permanent fairgrounds.⁷ While in Washington state this summer I visited the Puyallup Fair (which has a function similar to that of the PNE as featured in Kiyooka's work); it is a site-specific fair complete with many of the same rides he featured in this PNE work. But with its concentration on rural themes, the Puyallup is more a descendant of the American county fair than the traveling carnival. In its 4H Club competitions (the PNE still has these as well) the rural is brought to the urban for competition and spectacle. One can witness barns full of animals set up for show (many with recipes above their heads), and

competitions outside from lassoing to pig racing. The food stands stretch for miles – cotton candy, funnel cakes, corn dogs, candy apples, chocolate-dipped cheesecake. Only at the fair is the theme of trashy indulgence celebrated to such an extent.

Part of the vernacular of North American youth is the amusement park, as a pre-existing space to use like the PNE (or theme parks like Disneyland, the boardwalk in Santa Cruz or Coney Island) or as a temporary escape from small-town or suburban boredom. The vulgarity of the amusement park seems to have always attracted youth, in whatever form it appears – from the rural county fair to the suburban parking lot fair, to the more permanent video arcade (more currently chains like Sega City, Iwerks' Cinetropolis and Playdium virtual-reality arcades) the lure of trash culture prevails.

Heavy mall traffic itself, like the crowd at the county fair or theme park, can loosen restraints on spending and overcome the sameness of the suburbs and the dispersal of the automotive city. The recipe results in small and large spaces that are close relatives of the theme park's ideal city, a closed city free from the uncertainty, poverty, and potential crime of the real streets.⁸

As teenagers, in my suburban home town, we always had a traveling fair for one weekend a year and it was always the same cheap thrill – getting drunk, spending all of our money on impossible games (to win a feathered roach clip or maybe a cheap teddy bear if we were lucky), flirting with the carnies to get free stuff (who were often rumored to be recent ex-cons). Someone would puke on the Gravatron or the Tilt-a-Whirl, and while rumors would fly about people having died on similar poorly constructed rides, a fight would inevitably break out. The traveling fair represents freedom to the suburban teenager, as it allows an outlet to escape into a trashy fantasy world, one represented in films about other places. We would wait in anticipation for weeks before its arrival to our Supervalu parking lot each spring for the vulgar thrills to sweep through town. Similarly, in his PNE film, Kiyooka momentarily highlights two adolescent girls (who appear to be in uniform with their matching kerchiefs) exchanging phone numbers with a cute teenage boy. This is representative of the timeless element of youth that is synonymous with the fair - the fleeting indulgence of eating "those little donuts", flirting with older boys, or riding on the rickety wooden roller coaster. I witnessed hoards of teenagers

at the PNE this summer (mostly groups of girls) hanging out, going on the occasional ride and flirting with the staff. Now in its 85th year, with Playland being a somewhat separate beast (with corporate sponsorship by Rogers and Coca-Cola, among others), rides ranging from the legendary wooden rollercoaster to the brand new Hellevator, the PNE's function has changed little for local youth.

Kiyooka exposes the structure of the PNE in his film, photographs and slide sequence, scanning past the trailers and behind-the-scenes areas, exposing them as golden huts at dusk. Kiyooka does this in the same manner that he used the gloves left behind by the fair's laborers in his photo-poetry series StoneDgloves (made when he was commissioned to build the Canadian Pavilion in the 1969 Osaka World's Fair). The StoneDgloves was a seminal piece for Kiyooka, as it marked a shift in his practice from abstract painting to a multi-disciplinary (mostly photo-based) practice. Like in Abu Ben Adam's Vinyl Dream (a photographic work featuring his tent-like pavilion, lit from inside), he focuses for a moment on a glowing light from inside a tent, visually linking the PNE with the Osaka fair. (It is of interest that in R&D for Social Life: Retail and the City, Davis cites Osaka as a city that is growing as an interactive media mecca. As the site of Universal Studios Japan, the American-based company is setting up a fully wired theme park as part of a high-tech urban centre, around which western Osaka is currently being redeveloped.⁹) As Kiyooka's multi-disciplinary practice grew, he continued to revisit Osaka (and other parts of Japan), as it had cultural significance for him and was, in a sense, the birthplace of his photographic practice. The use of colour and of light and shadow in the PNE work seems slightly un-Kiyookaesque, as there is a vibrant intensity that is a far cry from the grayish tone that dominates much of his photographic and filmic work. In this case, Kiyooka seems to be representing the celebratory spirit of the amusement park – in all of its garish glory. He takes it to the point, after sunset, of having only the brightly coloured lights representing objects in a black void of space (reminiscent of Michael de Courcy's photographs of neon signs from 1979's 13 Cameras). He focuses on words, like Tilt-a-whirl, Zipper and Jaguar, which only make sense in the context of the fair, when they take on a weight of familiarity and memory as signifiers of the rides, which in turn become floating colours that Kiyooka zooms in and out of. Everything becomes abstracted in a drunken fashion, and the lack of sound in the film makes it quite dreamlike – with no real sense of time, space or location.

Most of Kiyooka's filmic works were made as he took his camera(s) out on ordinary excursions. He made narratives based on non-events, as Charlotte Townsend-Gault writes in *The Living of Modern Life – In Canada*:

It's the living of modern life gone banal. It's Warhol movies gone local. From cosmopolitan anywhere to a Vancouver corner, a Sechelt beach, local specifics.¹⁰

That description nicely describes Kiyooka's process in making his filmic and sequential work. It is the extremely local speaking about the global, and finding the poetic in the everyday. Where Jeff Wall would stage the event for one monumental still, Kiyooka has drawn out the poetry through series of images. He creates an overall reading through images that would not hold up singularly to deliver his message, but instead are reliant on their seriality. For Kiyooka's work, sequence is essential – as non-linear as it can be at times.

As part of the downtown eastside community that loosely includes the PNE, one cannot help but read this work as a part of the daily narratives he was exploring in his street works of the same time (late 70's – early 80's). Works like *Powell Street Promenade* (1980) and *Untitled (Powell Street ear Blue Mule)* (1978-80) compose a theatricality on the street, with unassuming performers passing through. Other film, video and photographic works he made were centered around performances at the annual *Powell Street Festival*, again part of his community (historically a predominantly Asian-Canadian community, formerly known as *Japantown*¹¹). The other filmic work in this exhibition, entitled *Back Alley Pandemonium*, is taken from the window of Kiyooka's Keefer Street residence in a high-speed all-day view of the alley and all of its happenings. Kiyooka said of his practice, "The entirety of my art has come out of the fact that I live on Keefer Street in Vancouver".¹² This pocket of work based on Vancouver's Pacific National Exhibition in 1978 is just a small piece of Kiyooka's sprawling practice, exemplary of his ability to connect with many histories and continuing discussions through series of images based in the local.

Kyla Mallett, 2000

Endnotes

- 1 Twitchell, James B. *Carnival Culture: The Trashing of Taste in America*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 65
- 2 *ibid*, p. 63
- 3 *ibid*, p. 133
- 4 *ibid*, p. 135
- 5 Davis, Susan G. "R&D for Social Life: Entertainment Retail and the City", *Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures*, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 135
- 6 *ibid*, p. 64
- 7 Dorst, John D. *The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 138
- 8 *ibid*, p. 149
- 9 Davis, Susan G. "R&D for Social Life: Entertainment Retail and the City", *Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2000, p. 136
- 10 Townsend-Gault, Charlotte. "The Living of Modern Life – In Canada", Roy Kiyooka, Vancouver, Artspeak Gallery and Or Gallery, 1991, p. 13
- 11 Sava, Sharla. "Roy Kiyooka: Photographing the Local from the Inside Out", *C Magazine*, November 1998 – January 1999, p. 30
- 12 Townsend-Gault, Charlotte. "The Living of Modern Life – In Canada", Roy Kiyooka, Vancouver, Artspeak Gallery and Or Gallery, 1991, p. 15

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