

Fae Yamaguchi

b.1955, Honolulu, Hawai'i, lives in Honolulu, O'ahu
exhibited in *Biennial V*

Behind the Scenes, 2012

video

running time 4 minutes and 53 seconds

Behind the Scenes is a look backstage at what goes on when the camera is not rolling. Frank and Bob and the Carrot have a conversation about the characters they portray in the *Frank and Bob* shorts which I have been working on for several years.

YAMAGUCHI (continued)

control, even though it is difficult to do it all. Ultimately it is easier to cast herself in multiple roles than to orchestrate a crew and coordinate a multifaceted production. She thus serves, alternately, as scriptwriter, puppeteer, camera-person, director, vocal talent, creator of sound and special effects, set designer, and costumer.

Working in a home-studio that looks like a magic closet turned inside-out, Yamaguchi develops story-lines that read like little vignettes from a larger, ongoing, even existential saga of the everyday. Like Saturday-matinee serials, there is often a sense of something having happened before, and a sense (sometimes delicious, sometimes ominous) that something is yet to come. Yamaguchi has been creating puppets since childhood. Her cast of puppet characters is an engagingly motley ensemble of creatures, generally fashioned on an unlikely armature: Yamaguchi uses a novelty toy, a shark whose mouth is controlled with a pull-lever handle, as the basis for most of her puppets, giving a decidedly off-the-wall twist to the notion of "talking heads." Once given limbs as needed, and costumed, the puppets are then manipulated, scene by scene, as the video is shot. Yamaguchi's post-production work centers more on the addition of non-visual or off-camera elements such as sound effects and dialogue looping; little if any cutting or re-sequencing is done, another way in which technological restraint contributes to a particular aesthetic.

There is often an obvious, even endearing transparency in much of Yamaguchi's work. Her gloved hands, for example, are visible in the manipulation of her puppet characters. In a strange sort of cultural parallel, then, Yamaguchi seems to operate in that same liminal space occupied by the black-clothed puppeteers in Japanese bunraku, an essential yet shadowed presence which animates each character in an unfolding drama. In a curious way, the artist's willingness to bring the "behind-the-scenes" aspects of performance and production in front of the camera ultimately adds to the magic rather than dispelling it.

Yamaguchi also feels that creating the physical environment, props and personae are quite directly an extension of her training in sculpture, which often had a kinetic dimension to it. Often, the complete work extends beyond the video itself to the creation of an ambient space into which the viewer is invited and made comfortable. Her current work, presented in this exhibition, features multiple monitors which, while playing the same videotape, will each have a separate and more intimate viewing space.

Noting some of the qualities of Yamaguchi's work—such terms as playful, dumb, child-like, awkward, unpolished might come to some minds—it would not be unreasonable to assume that her

intended audience is a very youthful one. Yamaguchi, who has also had extensive experience as an artist-teacher at the elementary level, particularly appreciates that quality in children which allows them to just keep going, unconcerned with if not unaware of obstacles. It is an engaging trait which she also imparts to some of her characters, including Frank and Bob, featured in *The Interview*, her current work, who appeared first in *A Complex Situation*.

Yet there is also evidence to suggest that her work too is more complex than one might initially assume, with definite generational cross-over appeal. The back-story on Frank and Bob, for example, whom the artist likens to Laurel and Hardy, is that they met when applying to be hosts of a children's TV show. Yamaguchi imagines them as the kind of people (can we call them adults?) who earnestly read self-help books and try to apply them to their own life situations.

And who is the audience? The artist suggests that although her work is perhaps more oriented to the adult viewer, children are also drawn to it. The distinctive combination of innocence and experience, high-jinks and melodrama which are hallmarks of Yamaguchi's puppet-videos create another kind of transitional space between childhood fantasy and adult reality—a space which the artist hopes children don't leave too soon, and which grown-ups might re-enter, and recapture.