

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

YOKO TAKASHIMA WITH RUBY ARNOLD



UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA
LEGACY ART GALLERIES

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LEGACY ART GALLERY DOWNTOWN

Yoko Takashima's interactive video and sound installation is the second exhibition in our series **IN SESSION** which highlights the current work of sessional instructors teaching in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Victoria.

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Design Katie Hughes

Photography Yoko Takashima

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ALL ARTWORK BY YOKO TAKASHIMA

COVER IMAGE

Bridge Over Troubled Water (family), 2015

Video still



Bridge Over Troubled Water (Chris), 2015, Video still

BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

Bridge Over Troubled Water is an interactive video and sound installation project I developed working in close collaboration with Ruby Arnold. By using Cycling74's MAX and JITTER with other computer software and a Microsoft Kinect for interactive data collection, I produced a new form of video installation. In this project no identical image or performance is seen. More significantly, this technology allows for unexpected narratives to be constructed through the constant self-generation of the video and sound.

This so-called "music video" of the popular classic, *Bridge Over Troubled Water* by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, is played repeatedly for the duration of the exhibition. Approximately 37 singers volunteered to be recorded—they include friends, family, choir groups, theatre community, semi professionals, and professionals, in a variety of age groups. Each singer was videotaped while they sang the song, their face centred and looking directly at the camera lens. With the use of a green screen and then chroma keying of the footage, the collage of singers is backed by moving images of ambiguous hybrid landscapes, which act as visual metaphors of our modern reality, encompassing anxiety, horror and hope.

It is significant for me to explore the shifting role of artists in the digital era. In a time of saturated images, information, and "high-speed fetch", our role is now focused on selecting and preparing guidelines and then witnessing what technology can provide and manipulate. I am interested in exploring how technology used this way can produce effects beyond the artist's authorship and premeditated aesthetic. The lyrics of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* convey the message of friendship and support, which are fundamental, ageless human needs. In exploring new technology with this song, we celebrate the up-lifting spirit in humanity and the new ways of delivering it.



Bridge Over Troubled Water (Thomas), 2015, Video still

Yoko Takashima

March 2015

I WILL LAY ME DOWN

*When you're weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I will dry them all;
I'm on your side.*¹

Simon and Garfunkel's anthem of comfort and reassurance — *Bridge over Troubled Water* — is at the core of Yoko Takashima's newest interactive sound and video work. The song, looping from start to finish continuously, forms the consistent framework for the otherwise ever-evolving installation.

Between 2013 and 2014, Takashima recruited and filmed 37 volunteers, each of whom sang solo over the same piano rendition of the song. The singers, varying in gender, age, and ethnicity, are positioned identically, intimately close and looking directly into the camera. While some of the singers are professionals and others not, this brilliant composition inspired each to sing with immense passion and sincerity. Significantly, Takashima, her husband, and their two daughters are included in the group of performers.

With the technical expertise of fellow artist Ruby Arnold, Takashima used these performances as the building blocks for a complex, interactive, self-generating installation that provides infinite combinations of singers. Each rendition of the song is unique. Faces of the singers transform gradually from one to the next, often in multiple and unpredictable layers. Voices blend and separate, sometimes creating unexpected harmonies or discords.

It is the viewer who brings the work life; when the darkened exhibition space is vacant the audio plays quietly while the video is reduced to black and white. When someone enters the space, the sound level and colour intensity are gradually increased — the nearer one approaches the projection, the louder the sound becomes. To retreat is to attenuate the volume. The layered faces fill the wall

¹ Paul Simon lyrics from the song *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, 1969.

in magnitude larger than life. We see the singing human faces as beautiful in their openness and sincerity, while verging on the ridiculous in scale, proximity, and unexpected combinations of over-layered facial features. The space is filled with their presence. While interactivity has been integral to some of her past works, the constant regeneration of this work is new to Takashima's 20-year video-based practice. It represents her desire to push video installation art beyond simple screening pieces placed within a space to offering infinitely-varied experiences involving the whole space with the viewer.

In it, the singers appear to be situated in a landscape that transforms from serene to horrific. With flowers blooming, missiles falling, and mushroom clouds exploding, her imagery runs the gamut from calm to destruction to calm again. For the setting, Takashima has chosen the picturesque waterfront view from Dallas Road in Victoria. The specific and local nature of this iconic landscape reminds us that terrifying events are no longer necessarily buffered by large distances. She comments that the familiar backdrop speaks to the "sneaking in of fear into our living space."² And yet she intends the work to hold a positive message — one that triumphs over our fears by suggesting the possibility of hope through the power of human connection evident in the faces, voices, and words.

Over her last two decades of work, Takashima has consistently focused on her own body over various stages of life to explore her place as an individual while concurrently delving into the universalities and depth of human existence. Her video works such as *Brushism*, (1996, a film projection of her enlarged and isolated mouth as she brushes her teeth), *As If*, (1996, her mouth licking and manipulating a white viscous material from what seems like the surface of the video monitor) and *Islands Burning*, (1998, her breasts up close as they are and squeezed by hands that transform back and forth from female to male) uncomfortably bring attention to familiar yet private activities. In these singularly-engaged video works, Takashima presents her body, as non-narrative subject, performing within a limited or unidentifiable context, often truncated, anonymous, and isolated in

² Yoko Takashima interviewed by the author, February 27, 2015.

an unnervingly close proximity. Of this, curator Sylvie Fortin asserted that Takashima uses her body to “create situations that hover between intimacy and estrangement.”³ In *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, “estrangement” is overtaken both formally and narratively by “connection”. The anonymity of the isolated body parts is replaced by complete faces that are recognizable in portrait format and set, for the first time, within an identifiable context – the landscape. Further, in it, Takashima’s own body moves from being one of the primary focuses to but one of many within a community.

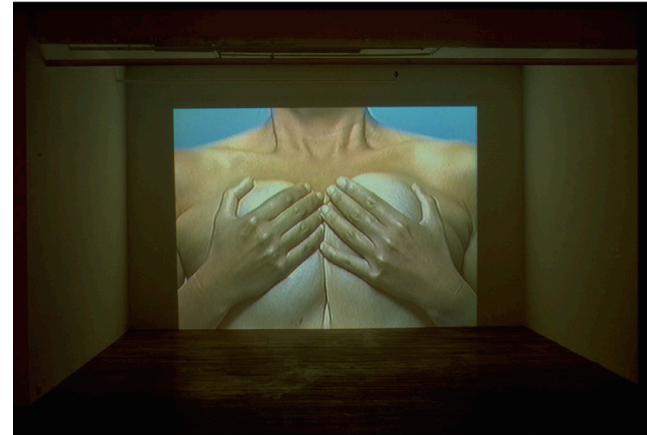


As If, 1996, Installation

In 2003, artist Mowry Baden described Takashima’s works produced up to that point as embodying both seduction and repulsion. He suggested this duality aligns with the Japanese propensity to reconcile two visions in art – the minimalist and the grotesque.⁴ In *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, we see this dualistic vision develop in new directions. Takashima’s leaning towards minimalism, though downplayed, is evidenced in the simple piano music framework that loops constantly. Within the visually rich and frenetic landscape, the gargantuan scale, and the unnatural transformation of faces, the grotesque most often dominates. It is inevitable that at times the morphing faces appear as absurd – beauty and repulsion in an unending flow that belies the more consistently and pleasing unity of the words and voices. This arbitrary and continuous process of visual mutation does not allow the eye to settle and absorb the individuality of any one performer.

³ Sylvie Fortin, *Bare Wonders* (Montreal, PQ: OBORO, 1999) p. 40.

⁴ Mowry Baden, *Yoko Takashima* (Kamloops, B.C. and Lethbridge Alberta: Kamloops Art Gallery and Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2003) pp 33-34.



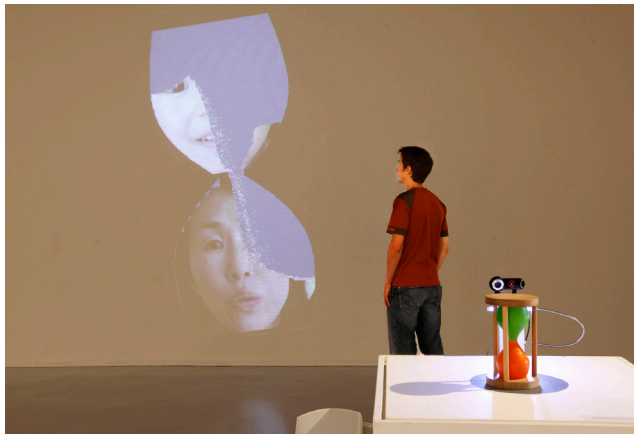
Islands Burning, 1998, Installation



Coffin Crib, 2002, Video still



Three Buddhas , 2002, Giclée print



For Ever More , 2008, Installation

Having children (giving birth to and being responsible for a living thing) has had a profound effect on Takashima and her artistic practice. It is apparent in her shifting interest in the body that began with the birth of her first child. In these works she questions gender roles and individual identity more specifically in the context of her fascination with procreation, parenthood and her relationship to these new humans. In *Coffin Crib* (2002) the monitor affixed to the coffin-shaped crib reveals in part a video of her fecund torso which combines and recombines with the torso of her husband transforming into a bi-gendered headless, pregnant body. In *Three Buddhas* from the series *Familii* (2002) digitally-manipulated photographs reveal the artist, her baby, and her husband blending and conjoining, as she played with the genetic possibilities of the child that inextricably linked her to her husband. In *For Ever More* (2008) a digital hourglass tips back and forth according to the interaction of the viewer. The sand running from end to end alternatively covers or reveals the faces of the singing mother and child. When these pieces were shown in the exhibition titled *Blend* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 2009, Takashima acknowledged that her work was unapologetically playing up and critiquing her “personal sentimentality” as mother. She called herself a “junior parent”, recognizing she expected this would change and grow over time.⁵ Recently reflecting on the significance of motherhood, she said her work at that time had been “about me and what they (my children) meant to me.”⁶ Today with children aged 14 and 11 she acknowledges a broader understanding of their relationship.

Largely because of her focus on motherhood itself, *Bridge Over Troubled Water* represents Takashima’s first major work since *For Ever More* in 2008. “I felt that I wasn’t going to produce art unless it was something meaningful above and beyond what was going on with my children. For me, parenting is like a creative pursuit, it is almost like a time-based performance art project. Through this, my creative desires were satisfied for many years.”⁷ Further it represents Takashima’s continuing interest in using technology as an artistic tool in her ongoing research

⁵ Lisa Baldissera with Yoko Takashima, *Blend: Yoko Takashima* (Victoria, B.C.: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2009) n.p.

⁶ Telephone interview with Yoko Takashima, March 3, 2015.

⁷ Ibid.

into new modes of expression. To have the technology bring her ideas to life, she emphasizes, has only been possible because of the essential collaboration with Ruby Arnold.

With this ambitious installation Takashima feels strongly that she indeed has something meaningful to explore – something that is pertinent both in a universal and a personal sense, emanating from her developing role as a parent within the larger global context. In this work, Takashima involves us in an unending performance that personifies the interconnectedness of a larger more encompassing humanity beyond the nuclear family unit. No longer physically tied to her children in the tangible way as in infancy and toddlerhood, Takashima steps back to look beyond genetic roots or basal human instinct to consider what this relationship could look like. The family members, neither highlighted nor focused upon in this installation, are part of something larger, blending and permeating in relation to other people in a representation of a broader compassionate community. The lyrics of *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, in their unconditional expression of the love and support, echo the hopes for a more matured relationship. Indeed, with the attestation “I will comfort you”, sung by all, even the children, we see acknowledgement of the relationship extending to reflect the duality (and even the reversal) of roles that comes over time in the child/parent relationship. The installation suggests that through family, friends, and basic human connections, we can provide for each other the support that will get us through the fear and discord that otherwise characterizes our world.



Bridge Over Troubled Water (Cam), 2015, Video still

Mary Jo Hughes

Director, University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries

BIOGRAPHY

Yoko Takashima was born and raised in Japan. She received her BA from Kyoto Women's University, BFA from University of Lethbridge, and MFA from University of Victoria. Since 1995 she has taught digital media, video, sculpture and photography as a sessional instructor at the University of Victoria and University of Lethbridge.

Takashima's solo exhibitions were held at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Western Front Gallery in Vancouver, Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge, OBORO in Montreal, A Space in Toronto, The New Gallery in Calgary, and Art Tower Mito in Mito, Japan. Her selected group shows include at Vancouver Art Gallery, Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Site Santa Fe in New Mexico, Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Toronto Photography Workshop, Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Bonne Kunst Museum in Germany, Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik in Denmark, and Thailand New Media Art Festival. Takashima's work is in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

BACK COVER IMAGE

Bridge Over Troubled Water (Ruby), 2015
Video still

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Nami Dupain	Mark Marquette	Tijah Marshall
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