

ARTFORUM

January 2008,
Vol. XLVI, no. 5
pg. 288

SAN FRANCISCO

Takeshi Murata

RATIO 3

Few of us acknowledge that the snapshots and video clips on our hard drives, much less on YouTube, won't last forever. Even fewer, save for computer programmers, understand just how the pixels that compose those images will decay. In his masterful video works, Takeshi Murata doesn't so much point to this built-in obsolescence as harness a rich painterly possibility to fugitive, consumer-grade visual information.

Murata's recent exhibition featured two projected videos, *Escape Spirit VideoSlime*, 2007, and *Untitled (Pink Dot)*, 2006. Both works have ominously buzzing sound tracks by Robert Beatty and reveal Murata's ability to transmogrify appropriated footage—generic nature films and the *Rambo* films, respectively—into complex, hypnotic compositions. The vivid, pulsating color of Murata's work is reminiscent of the fluorescent-toned vernacular of Paper Rad, but where the collective borrows from the aesthetic of Saturday morning cartoons, Murata's layered painterly effects, computer-generated pixels, and imagery from gore films congeal with a sophistication that belies the pop culture source material.

The six-minute, thirty-second *VideoSlime* plays as a kind of condensed ecological epic. Appropriating footage of chimpanzees from a nature documentary, the video superficially laments vanishing species. A rudimentary environmentalist fable, it is set in a shady forest interrupted by stun-gun zaps of acid-trip color and jarring electronic sound.

The story line might also function as allegory for the nonarchival nature of digital media—and the title seems to prompt the subjection of such material to a radical process of liquefaction. Murata manages to transform pixels into biomorphic globs that confuse the distinctions between digital and analog representation. He generates sublime moments that waver between abstraction and representation, with recognizable elements emerging from, then sinking back into, digitally rendered primordial ooze. When a chimp sadly tilts its head downward and devolves into a puddle of color, Murata generates unexpected pathos. Other passages suggest a Gustav Klimt painting corroding beneath a paintball splatter of antifreeze. Elsewhere in the piece, the artist emulates the vibrant color schemes with which scientists often encode microscope images, turning the body into an alien landscape.

Pink Dot, a less overtly narrative but even more effective work, focuses on a magenta circle that pulses in the center of a vivid blue background. In this five-minute loop (the sound track is longer) Murata uses footage of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, picturing him emerging from the titular element and wrestling with a constantly shifting landscape. As in *Escape*, there are occasional moments in which clarity emerges from the molten chaos—the actor's face and chiseled bare torso are fleetingly visible—and these images function as brief, bracing interjections of "reality." Similarly, Murata manages to remove the ironic wink of appropriating such recognizable material—Sly here is a haunting specter navigating a morass of mud and guns;



Takeshi Murata,
*Escape Spirit
VideoSlime*, 2007,
still from a color
video, 6 minutes,
30 seconds.
Sound track by
Robert Beatty.

the stuff of actual nightmares, not Hollywood artifice—and functions not unlike 1960s horror film queen Barbara Steele, who floats through a wavering black-and-white interior in Murata's *Untitled (Silver)*, 2006 (not shown here). Visually, these works are astoundingly complex, yet it's difficult not to wonder about the long-term viability of dealing with inherently ephemeral media. Time will tell.

—Glen Helfand