

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition by Jon Sasaki
June 22 to July 24, 2007

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Monsieur Sasaki's Holiday

By Brian Joseph Davis

The “everyman” is simply essential in physical comedy. For an audience to truly unite in laughter, the comedian must be a projecting surface from which our own failure and misery can be reflected back. Being “out of time” is also a must for the genre. In *Wishing for Three More Wishes*, a collection of videos and installations, artist Jon Sasaki writes and performs the trials of artistic production as comedy shorts, starring himself as an “every artist.” Like an out-of-date vision of a worker from the future, Sasaki’s character is silent and dressed in nondescript beiges and whites. He fulfils both the “everyman” and the “out of time” mandates for the genre.

While these video punchlines are in the tradition of physical comedy (the turns and pratfalls come from the expectations of a given setting; in this case, an artist’s life), there’s an ambiguous and conceptual depth to Sasaki’s work that just isn’t there in, say, an episode of *Three’s Company*. There is, however, a resonance between Sasaki’s work and that of French comedian and filmmaker Jacques Tati.

Tati began his career in the 1930s, performing as a bumbling postman character in a series of shorts. (And I mean short films. Not the garments.) It wasn’t until the 1950s, when he created his Monsieur Hulot character, that Tati’s comedy became something other than comedy. With joyfully simple and subversive results, Tati began positioning his anachronistic art form as a both a window on, and a critique of, European modernity.

In *Monsieur Hulot’s Holiday* (1953), a French vacation town is inundated by city bourgeois whose search for transcendence in their mandatory summer vacations has been ritualized into annual traffic jams and bridge nights. The expectations of the vacation as panacea for the side effects of postwar life set a perfect stage for Tati’s Hulot character. For example, during a road trip away from the beach, Hulot’s car breaks down at a graveyard where a funeral is starting. While changing his rubber tube tire, Hulot drops his spare in a puddle. Picking it up, he finds the tire encrusted with leaves. An undertaker walks by,



Jon Sasaki, video still, *Fireworks*, 2006



Jon Sasaki, *The Artists First Painting*, Bronzed, originally painted in 1988, bronzed in 2007

and, assuming Hulot to be a florist, grabs the ersatz wreath to add it to the ceremony. A quick insert shot later on shows the tire/wreath deflating during the ceremony. That Tati placed a funeral scene within a beach farce gives a hint of the haunting melancholy at the core of his physical comedy. Hulot cannot partake in society with any kind of success, at least not the expected kind of success – but Hulot's mistakes always do, by his logic at least, succeed. Like Sasaki's character, Hulot is the accidental anarchist; his gags are only the result of his genuine attempts to fit into society. This tone is much more apparent in *Mon Oncle* (1958), in which modernity—that egregious philosophy of design and living that dictated all “problems” must be “solved”—is the oblivious mark.

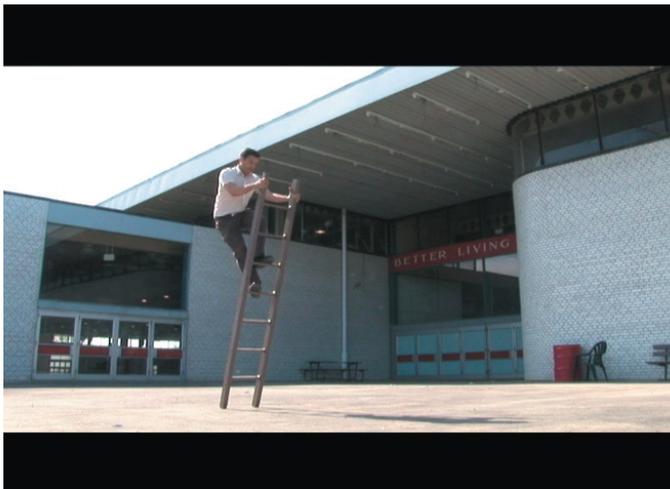
As sketched out in Sasaki's “Fireworks” video, the problem of displaying art has long been solved with stock starkness—white-on-gray, cube-on-cube display vitrines. This kind of detachment has fuelled an at one time intriguing, but now mostly stale tradition of institutional critique. Sasaki's very extreme gesture of throwing lit fireworks into a vitrine draws our attention away from any supposed problems of display and towards the surprising strength of these materials. Just a shade melancholic, there's also the acknowledgement that, for all the beauty of the shaped explosions, they would not exist without the Plexiglas and perfectly miter-cut wood that so many contemporary artists struggle with.

The comic (and maudlin) potential of framing is carried over to one of Sasaki's objects in the exhibition, “The Artist's First Painting, Bronzed.” The victim is a “moody oil portrait done in high school,” and the act of bronzing (one form of

ornamentation) over its gilt frame (another form of ornamentation) is just plain funny. But it's also a serious commentary on the development of one's practice and the ceremonies of reward that inform both a child's growth and an artist's emergence. The surface play between the bronze, the painting underneath, and the gilt becomes a series of negations. Its cheap signifiers of “classiness,” one versus the other, duel to a bitter, bitter end.

But back to the beach: in this short, a waiter checks his watch every time a grandfather clock chimes. When Hulot resets the clock, the waiter checks his watch out of habit. Expectation dictates that the waiter shouldn't be holding a coffee when he does so, and expectation also dictates that an uptight customer shouldn't be under that coffee. In the hotel's dining room, when Hulot reaches for salt across a fellow diner who is simultaneously trying to wipe his own mouth, properly, with a napkin, Hulot's improper sleeve preempts and completes the job for the diner, repeatedly, to the diner's consternation. Tati's punchlines replace one sense of order with another—a freer order somehow more in line with the way life is experienced.

As entertaining as Sasaki's shorts are, they are not as easy as entertainment. Even the chance of a freer order is denied: sometimes by the brevity of the work, sometimes by his chosen actions. If Tati thwarts the expected order, then Sasaki's art comes from thwarting even that thwarting. Tati was an insane perfectionist. His gags and extras would be choreographed until exhaustion, and he would add details, sub-punch lines, and labyrinths of meaning into the minutiae of a 10-second splashing-puddle gag. For *Playtime* (1968), his career-capping folly of a film, Tati created a set that was a one-fifth-



Jon Sasaki, video still, *Ladder Climb*, 2006



Jon Sasaki, video still, *24 lbs*, 2006

scale replica of Paris, which he filmed on for years of strained toil—suggesting his fun wasn't so fun. In contrast, Sasaki's more casual methodology can be seen in his "Ladder Climb" video: he attempts to climb a straight ladder while simultaneously holding it up. The video appears more like a filmed rehearsal than a slick gag. Think Chris Burden, on fast-forward, with the theme music from *Benny Hill* playing in the background.

The unlikely dimension in Sasaki's *Wishing For Three More Wishes*, especially in "Ladder Climb," is hope. Laugh if you want: we're talking comedy and potential grievous injury here. It is funny shit. Sasaki, who plans on recreating the act portrayed in "Ladder Climb" once a year in hopes of bettering his performance, is invoking the bureaucratic hurdles particular to Canadian artists as feats somewhere between Olympic spunk and base slapstick.

In the video "24 lbs," the artist holds a 24-pound anvil over the edge of his apartment's balcony. In this regard, Sasaki connects with endurance-

flavoured performance art of the 1970s. Instead of repeating experiments, though, Sasaki has rewritten them with punk attenuation, giving his actions the brevity of a Jack Goldstein-like blow to the head. The duration of "24 lbs" has been timed to the length of Sasaki's ability to hold up the anvil, an object which, for boomers and Gen X-ers who grew up with cartoons that are now censored, was a first encounter with *deus ex machina*, a final note in any symphony of violence. While Monty Python once used the giant anvil ironically in the kind of simple farce they set out to tear apart, Sasaki's use isn't iteration or irony. Because the piece ends with a fadeout, it's a punchline that never happens, an elision that suggests either cartoon terror or an act of last-minute heroism. Each is as likely as the other.

Wishing for Three More Wishes is elegant and formalized but it is far from cold and closed. While empathy for Sasaki's character is abundant and easy, he never falls back on mere bathos, even as he falls down, again, again, and again.

Jon gratefully acknowledges the support of the DMS at the University of Guelph for this exhibition.

About the Artist

Jon Sasaki's videos have been presented at the 50th Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, Eyebeam Gallery (NYC), and the Rooftop Films (Brooklyn) screening series. His work has been included in projects for Digifest (The Design Exchange, Toronto), and the Playlist Thursday event series at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, (Toronto). He is member of the Instant Coffee art collective (on leave), and currently lives and works in Toronto.

About the Writer

Brian Joseph Davis is an artist and writer living in Toronto. *The Definitive Host*, a recent compilation of his audio projects, includes Sony/BMG's infamous EULA (end user license agreement) performed by a women's choir, as well as other near hits. *I, Tania*, his funny book about terrorism, will be published in Fall, 2007.

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