

by Rohini Malik Okon

Leo Asemota

Working across and between a number of disciplines and media is fundamental to the artistic strategy of Leo Asemota. Sometimes playful and experimental, sometimes darkly disconcerting, and often realized through an evocative sensory richness, his works centre on encounters with the complexities of representation and identity. In seeking to subvert our understandings of established norms and beliefs and to unravel the assumed meanings of discursive terms, Asemota draws our attention to points and moments where all is not as it seems.

In the photographic series *Black and White: Case Study #1* (2000), deceptively simple compositions of everyday prosaic objects become metaphors for more complex relationships and reveals unstable and unspoken discourses. The term 'black and white' is often associated with 'truth' and the reporting of it, but also with fixed polarities of perception, which deny the existence of ambiguity and blurry grey zones in between. Two works in the series depict a blackboard, chalk and duster: in one image the board is covered with a film of white dust, suggesting the traces of erasure, while in the other image the word 'black' has been written a number of times in white chalk on the black board, evoking the fragility and contingency of the term and the imminent possibility of erasure and removal.

Asemota's interest in opening up and questioning the assumed fixity of discursive terms is taken further in his film work *Palindrome: r. s. s. r.* (2001), a series of richly textured vignettes on the complexities of race, sin, sex and religion. Reveling in the interplay of light, sound, and movement the artist adopts a different narrative strategy in each of the short films as he attempts to reveal other ways of seeing and being seen in the world. In 'race' he plays on the word itself, depicting a group of athletes as they line up at the starting block. Silent except for the sound of the starter gun, the work focuses on the skin of the black and white competitors, as well as suggesting different contexts in which we may see a black man running: as an athlete, but also as an object of pursuit by a policeman or violent racist. 'Sin' is a chilling meditation on pedophilia, storytelling and deception. The four films are bound together by a Snellen chart, the optician's chart for vision testing, which becomes a metaphor for Asemota's 'testing' of the viewer's depths of perception.

Film is a medium that Asemota is constantly experimenting with. In his most recent film *Cult* (2003), he appears on screen for the first time as subject in one of his works. Depicting the process of creating a photographic work entitled *FITH WORK #23: The Cure*, this abstract and multi-layered piece plays with and confronts notions of representation and truth. The artist's ongoing series of *FITH* (fever in the head) *WORKS* (1999 -) take a variety of forms - objects, videos, photographs, collaborative pieces - and it is perhaps here that Asemota's incessant striving towards new means of expression is most potently revealed. These works have the raw immediacy of sketches, and represent both the working through of concepts and the artist caught in the midst of realising them.

A performative gesture underlies much of Asemota's practice. *Map Of A City* (2001), a series of photographs depicting police witness appeal boards in different parts of London, can be seen as an on-going narrative on urban anthropology, evoking the artist walking through and interacting with the city.

Never allowing himself or his work to become contained or fixed, Asemota's practice of provocation constantly defies expectation and skillfully opens up possibilities for the questioning of our preconceptions.

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