

GHOSTRIDE TO OBLIVION

By

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GHOSTRIDE TO OBLIVION

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## INTRODUCTION

*The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible.*

– Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

In April of 2011, I first began formulating the project that would constitute the summation of my MFA thesis exhibition *Ghostride to Oblivion*. Initially, the project was designed as an investigation into reality manipulation. I wanted to create a simulated situation that would be broken by a violent interruption as a means of understanding, what Baudrillard calls the impossibilities of reality in our present time.<sup>1</sup> The project took the form of a controlled experiment in absurdity, applying cyclical repetition as a means of evaluating internal constructs of reality and relational affects of external forces on those internal constructions. In other words, I wanted to better understand the limitations of the “imaginary” as juxtaposed to the “real” and if the two were in fact irrelevant terms as Baudrillard suggested.

My investigation was triggered initially by two events, the first being the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe, and the second taking place in 2008 in the Akihabara district of Tokyo, which I will go into further detail in the following section of this dissertation. However, I will take just a

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard asserts that a concept of reality is no longer possible because we are living in a state of consciousness that cannot distinguish between reality and simulated reality, Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", In *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis. (New York: New Museum, 1984), 261-266.

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However, I will take just a moment here to relay a few personal reflections on the Tōhoku disasters, as it helps to frame the primary structure of the *GTO* project.

Anyone who followed the unfolding of these disasters knows full well the extremity of the physical and psychological havoc that was forced upon the nation of Japan in the spring of 2011. I found myself indirectly affected by the occurrences, amidst concerns for the welfare of my wife's family, who were spread between Tokyo and Mt. Bandai, some 80km due west of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor site meltdowns. A bewildering state of frustration and helplessness overwhelmed me, as I felt both a fear for the safety of the country and its inhabitants, coupled simultaneously with a complete sense of disconnect between what was happening there and the geographical and psychological conditions of my own reality. Essentially, the resulting sense of an absolute lack of control over the inevitable, manipulative shifts caused by affecting external conditions led to the conception of the *GTO* project.

*Ghostride to Oblivion* thus developed into an absurd theater that makes a "comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and a world that transcends it."<sup>2</sup> It is the results of a yearlong investigation of how geography, social conditions, transcultural relationships, obsession, and media influence the construction of personal identity. It is an investigation that is far from over.

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus and other Essays*. (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 8.

## REINSTATING THE ALTERNATIVE REAL

On July 8<sup>th</sup> 2008, a man by the name of Tomohiro Katō drove a rented truck into a crowd of people in the Akihabara district of Tokyo, Japan. He struck five individuals with the rented vehicle and then proceeded to stab twelve more with a small dagger. Seven people in total were killed. The incident sent shock waves across the country, as it has long been considered a society safe from violent crimes.

The details of the event are not of much concern to an understanding of the *GTO* project. However, an assessment of the seemingly metaphysical dynamisms of the Akihabara district and the residuum of Katō's violent act on Akihabara's collective conscience does help to contextualize it. I will try to give a brief summarization (which could otherwise be a very lengthy discourse) of the Akihabara shopping area and its relationship to hyperreality.

Akihabara is a district in Tokyo dedicated to electronics and video games, as well as the highest concentration anywhere of materials dedicated to subcultures like *anime* (Japanese animation; animated TV programs and films), *kawaii* ("cute"; subculture of cute "character goods" and related products), *manga* (Japanese comic books or serialized graphic novels) and *otaku* (literally, "your home"; obsessed fans, primarily of anime and manga).<sup>3</sup>

As early as 2002, I began to take notice of Japanese artists who were working with concepts and images of pop phenomena, like that found in Akihabara. Artists like Makoto Aida, Yoshitomo Nara, and Akira Yamaguchi had

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<sup>3</sup> Definitions taken from *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. (New York: Japan Society, 2005), xiv.

made a particular impact on my artistic development, and with time I have integrated similar imagery and concepts into my own visual language (see Plate I).

Akihabara is a virtual epicenter of simulation, overflowing with spectral light and color, visceral stimulation and binary code. Together, its businesses, stores, and gaming centers create an environment very much like Disneyland, a “perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra.”<sup>4</sup> Both Disneyland and Akihabara depend upon illusions and phantasms, whose imaginary condition is neither true nor false. They have become their own realities, exemplary of hyperreality and the effects of consumer culture.

Akihabara’s darker side, however, is often far more transparent than that of Disney’s, as it regularly embraces sexual and violent imagery. The lines between what we are to perceive as real and imaginary are more blurred in Akihabara. Disneyland purposefully defines itself as fantasy, negating the “outside world”, so to make the rest of America appear “more real” or “more adult”.<sup>5</sup> Akihabara culture, which maintains an integrated position within Japanese culture, has an ever-increasing global reach. Often, the manga and anime characters associated within this culture enter into existential crises of their own, where realities are fragmented or even obliterated.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra”, 261.

<sup>5</sup> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to try to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of hyperreality and of simulation. Ibid., 262.

<sup>6</sup> Viz. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* or *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi* for anime characters and storylines that enter into an existential crisis.

Maintaining a level of self-awareness, Akihabara has embraced artificiality as an acknowledgement of the empty wasteland of its own apocalyptic fate.<sup>7</sup> Whereas America continues to speak of itself through denial, in order to attempt, by simulating death, to escape its real death throes.<sup>8</sup> It is very much a different reality from America's yet it is the same; it has become our global, collective consumer culture.

The tragic episode in Akihabara demonstrates how such an act of violence might cause a break in such a well-established psychological continuum. Its deeply embedded simulacrum was split apart by the very "real" disruption. The instant Katō's truck made contact with the pedestrian mass; Akihabara's illusionary curtain was torn from its rod.

This instance acted as the substrate for the *GTO* project. I wanted to create a miniaturized reenactment, a theater of comical violence that magnetized the situation; that reversed the polarities of "real" and "imaginary" as a way of raising questions pertaining to the spectacle of our times. Have we doomed ourselves to live in a state of perpetual present, only to be momentarily woken from our sleep of imagery when brushed by mortality, a reminder of our own mortality? Must we continually prove to ourselves that we exist? Must we ritualize

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<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested through critical discourse by individuals such as Takashi Murakami and Midori Matsui, that this blurring of lines, heightened level of graphic content as well as adolescent cuteness is a direct result of the atrocities brought upon Japan by the dropping of the two atomic bombs, and the post war infantilization of Japan by the American government. See Midori Matsui. "Beyond the Pleasure Room to a Chaotic Street: Transformation of Cute Subculture in the Art of the Japanese Nineties." In *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. (New York: Japan Society, 2005). or Takashi Murakami. "Earth at my Window." In *Little Boy: The Art of Japan's Exploding Subculture*. (New York: Japan Society, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra", 266.



our own deaths, to renew the cycle through a mirror of crisis?<sup>9</sup> In order to better understand these questions, I had to explore my own geography; I had to comb my own psychic landscape. After a month or so of research I decided that I would conduct my experiment in the Texas panhandle. I would go into the desert.

#### THE LANDSCAPE IS MOTORIZED: SPEED, VIOLENCE, & DESERT CINEMA

*This is the originality of the American West; it lies in that violent, electric juxtaposition... in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of the desert... All the intelligence of the earth and its elements gathered together here, in a matchless spectacle: a geographic epic. Cinema is not alone in having given us a cinematic vision of the desert. Nature itself pulled off the finest of its special effects here...*

*One may speak of the abstraction of the desert, of a deliverance from the organic, a deliverance that is beyond the body's abject passage into carnal inexistence, into that dry, luminous phase of death in which the corruption of the body reaches completion. The desert is beyond this accursed phase of decomposition, this humid phase of the body, this organic phase of nature.*<sup>10</sup>

A 1982 80cc Minarelli motorcycle, sixty-four cinderblocks, a quart of red paint and a camera. These were the materials employed to create the first installation of *Ghostride to Oblivion*. I chose a site just east of Palo Duro Canyon, Texas and arranged the shoot in early October on the property of rancher Jack

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-71.

Craft (see Plate II). I chose this location primarily for its cinematic presence (the irony of a native Texan exploring hyperreality through the geographic specificity of the desert, based not on physical familiarity but cinematic references seemed ridiculously appropriate). For this reason, the Italian Western genre was adapted to structure *Stubborn Practice*, the video portion of the project (see Plate III).

Drawing from Sergio Leone films like *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and *A Fist Full of Dollars*, I structured the shoot around minimal, panning shots, Ennio Morricone selections inherent to the genre, plus implied violence and prolonged tension established through the actions of a centralized anti-hero. In this case, an anti-hero split in two to create a dual persona working simultaneously with and against his self. Other than these main elements, I allowed the evolution of the shoot to play itself out, leaving these three material objectives: the relationship between my body, the motorcycle and the challenge of the terrain; the cinderblock wall build; and the ghost-ride of the Minarelli into the brick wall.

In the case of the first objective, the motorcycle acts as purveyor of the real. It is the tactile, mechanical apparatus that records the connection between ground and rider, between the reaction and response of the rider to the reality that the ground presents. Speed becomes a real and present danger that links body, object, and environment. It is not anything like the encapsulated dashboard-brain and television-eye of the automobile. I was hyperaware of the physicality of the situation, and had to adjust myself accordingly. This aspect becomes the key element to the unfolding of the experiment.

The cinderblock wall that is erected and slathered with red latex house paint by the motorcycle rider's binary half (or the builder), acts as opposition (or as an obstacle) to the rider's trial. The wall is cartoon-like and absurd in its meaninglessness. Its form and red color are dumbly simple. It is a materialized empty vessel, open for the projection of infinite meaning. It is a harbinger of things to come and the experiment's negative control. In time, it proves the impossibility of the experiment; the impossibility of both reality and non-reality (see Plate IV).

The experiment concludes with the cooperative efforts of builder and rider. A very staged, and absurd violence is enacted upon the motorcycle as it is ghost-ridden into the void of the brick wall. The object is purposefully destroyed as to circumvent the possibility of it being destroyed. The paradoxical act endows the enactor with a power over the inevitable. It is a comically tragic act of delusional grandeur. It is a sacrificial death, bound by repetition. The repetitiveness of this ritual death is not, as suggested earlier, to renew a cycle. This is an embracement of the absurd; a self-aware embrace of its own apocalyptic wasteland. In Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he states that a "man that has become conscious to the absurd is forever bound to it." Sisyphus, futile laborer of the underworld, is bound by the gods to a perpetual task of pushing a large stone up the side of a mountain, only to have it roll back down when he reaches the summit. As the myth tells, his scorn for the gods, his hatred of death and his passion for life is what won him the perpetual burden of labor. But Camus

argues that it is his state of consciousness that makes this absurd hero superior to his fate. It is also his consciousness that makes his fate tragic.

*Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step of the way the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.<sup>11</sup>*

This is where the paradoxical pursuit represented by *Stubborn Practice* lies. Awareness becomes both liberating and damning.

## GHOSTRIDE TO OBLIVION

The exhibition consisted primarily of five components. The first being *Stubborn Practice*, the five minute video loop that was previously described. It was projected on two screens, playing simultaneously, placed at the far end of the gallery, facing as he or she entered. On one screen was the builder of the wall, on the other, the trial of the rider. Before the motorcycle makes its impact with the wall, both projections were synced to convey the same reality. The walls on which the videos were projected on were turned slightly in toward one another to create a dialogue between the two cinematic perspectives (see Plate V).

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<sup>11</sup> Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

Another small video projection, entitled *Road Test*, introduced the exhibition at the gallery's entrance. This one minute loop was created by a camera mounted directly to the handlebars of the motorcycle. The image is both hypnotizing and nauseating, as it presents chattering and disorienting landscapes that stand as testament to the challenge of the sand and rock comprised course. The video was projected onto a wall inside the gallery, so that it could be viewed through the glass doors of the gallery. This video ran for the entire duration of the exhibition, so that during the night hours its jittering signal pierced the dark of the rest of the building, like a hallucinatory window into another dimension. I organized that having this particular segment of *America* in mind: "There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room... It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages" (see Plate VI).<sup>12</sup>

On the eastern wall of the gallery hung a digital print entitled *From Akihabara to Tucomcari* (see Plate VII). The image was a composite photograph taken at the site of the motorcycle crash in the panhandle and a crime scene photo from the Akihabara incident of 2008. Among the crime scene markers and scattered evidence in the photographs foreground, I inserted parts of the crashed Minarelli. The image's illusionary quality is successful in its "something not quite right" aesthetic. There is a push and pull between the two photographs, which generate a tense deception.

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<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, *America*. 50.

Across the gallery's northern wall, I installed a series of framed digital prints that consisted of multiple manipulations to site-specific landscape shots (see Plate VIII). The landscapes correlated to one another to create an undulating panorama, whose topographic variations were both complimented and countered by a series of gridded dots with an oscillating spectrum. Like *Road Test*, the images were meant to act as a kind of simulated documentation. They are snapshots that capture an invisible dimension, an unseen signal transmitted by an alternative realm.

In the center the gallery was the fifth component of the exhibition, a sculptural installation entitled *GTO* (see Plate IX). This work was comprised of a replication of the 1982 Minarelli that was wrecked, which sat on a raw plane of birchwood, 5' x 5' square. The bike and plywood plane sat atop four wooden replicas of the incident markers that were pictured in *From Akihabara to Tucomcari*. Suspended from the ceiling above this set was a grouping of three flat screen TV monitors. Three separate video signals, depicting fragments of a larger image of circling buzzards, were sent to the monitors, so that the images could sync to one another in order to create a unified, singular image.

The process of reconstructing the bike played out like a slow reversal of the crash. With the wrecked skeletal frame, forks and spokes being the only remaining artifacts, each vital component of the bike was painstakingly cast in silicone and replicated into a colored plastic component. Fantastically colored, some of these mechanical objects became spectral in their refabricated state while others remained neutral – chameleonesque – in their representation. The

motor, for instance, remained a flat gray, its illusionism apparent only to the careful observer. This tension between the real and artificial parts heightens the perceptual intensity. The conceptual challenge of what are we perceive as actual and what we perceive as simulated becomes the central question of the real. In its newly reconstructed form, the Minarelli sat suspended between the literal markers of its demise (the crime scene markers) and the simulated harbingers of its death (the televised vultures). *GTO's* staged presence; like that of the fake western town or Bill Leavitt's "theater of the ordinary" plays on an illusion (see Plate X). It is built from the vernacular of familiar entertainment. It suggests many meanings, yet offers none. It is a product of our schizophrenic times.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*Ghostride to Oblivion* takes on narrative form only through its adaptation of cinematic reality. It tells a story in the sense that there is a passage of time that adheres to a theatricality that is both tragic and humorous. Elementally, however, it is a trial and error that is doomed to ceaselessly repeat itself. It depends on a violent disruption in a continuum, a displacement and rearrangement of a perceived reality in order to question the nature of the absurd as manifested by

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<sup>13</sup> According to Jameson postmodernism is defined by a form of cultural schizophrenia. This schizophrenia is described as a language disorder or an abnormality of a mature psyche. This breakdown can be linked to postindustrial modes of cultural production that, through numerous reconstructions of preexisting elements, produces an image of a "signifier that has lost its signified". Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *The Anti Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster. (New York: New Press, 1998), 136.

the presence of man and the world together.<sup>14</sup> It is dependent upon an action and a world that transcends it, so that its concepts may fully materialize (see Plate XI). The patterns of cyclical behavior, which stem throughout the work, border between delusional transcendence and affirmation of the simulated grid. The question remains whether recognition of the grid is enough to propose a break from it, or if we are indeed, as Jameson suggests, forever bound to the mechanisms of our historical amnesia. Over and over, *Ghostride to Oblivion* attempts to produce a solution.

The exhibition plays out like the beating of a head against a wall, always trying to achieve the impossible, always seeking the transformative moment, all the while remaining self-aware and paradoxically humorous.

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<sup>14</sup> Camus states that the Absurd is not in man, nor the world, but in their presence together. Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 8.





PLATE I





PLATE II



PLATE III





PLATE IV

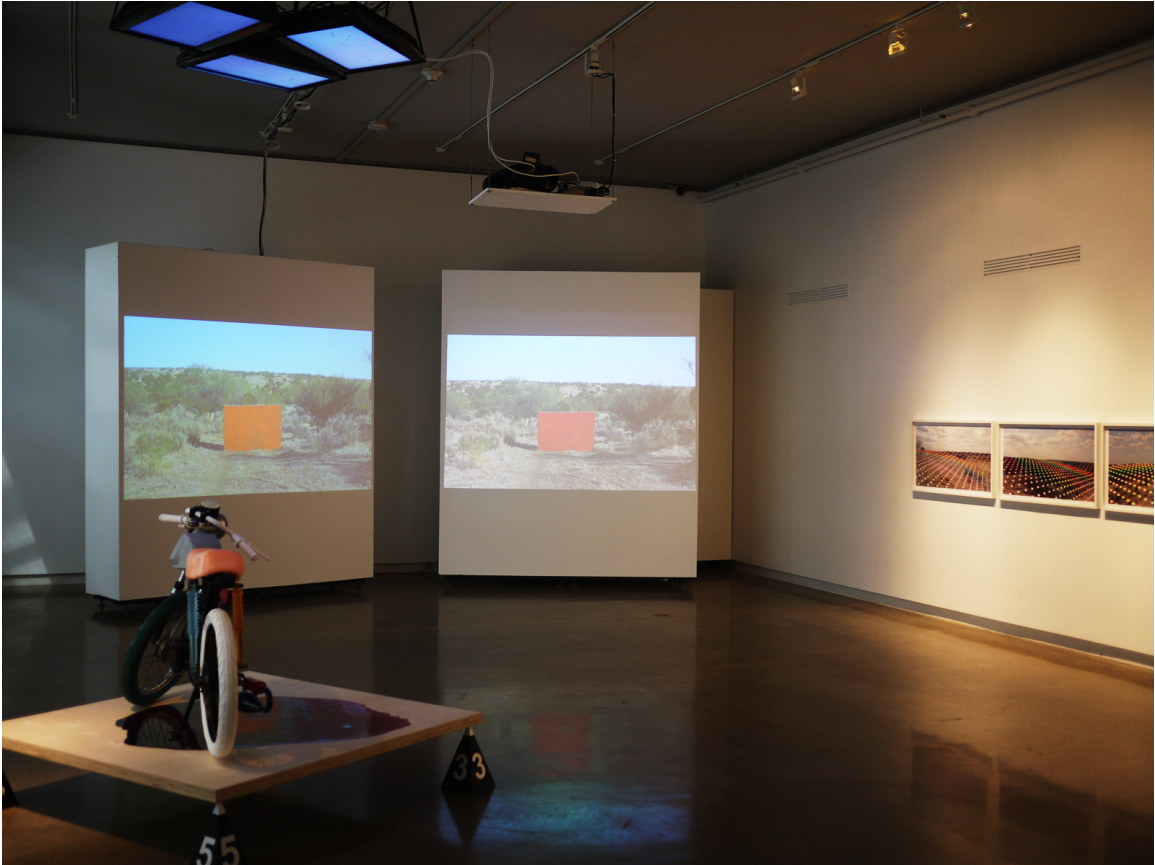


PLATE V



PLATE VI





PLATE VII

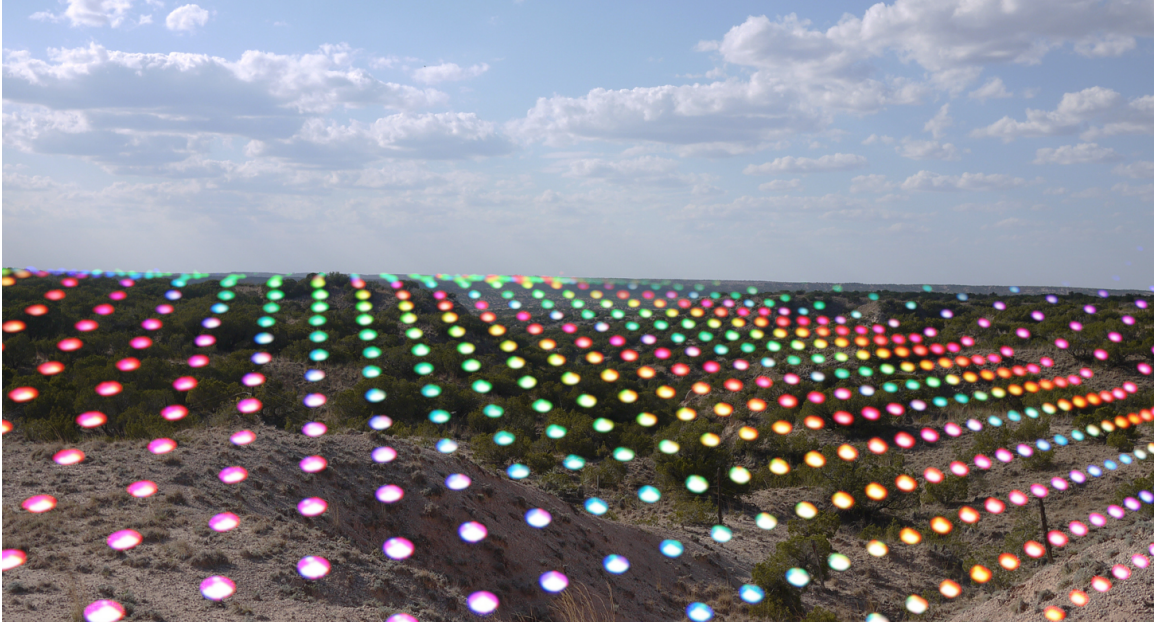


PLATE VIII





PLATE IX



PLATE X



PLATE XI

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## VITA

Gregory Ruppe was born August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1979 in Houston, Texas. He is the son of Marcella Mae Detwiler and Kenneth Albert Rupp. A 1997 graduate from Klein High School, Houston, he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a major in printmaking from the University of North Texas in Denton in 2002. He will receive a Master of Fine Art degree in sculpture from Texas Christian University in the spring of 2012. He is married to Hiroe Watanabe, and currently lives and works in Dallas, Texas.

## ABSTRACT

### GHOSTRIDE TO OBLIVION

My thesis exhibition, *Ghostride to Oblivion*, is the product of a yearlong project that investigates reality perception and is an attempt to control that which is uncontrollable, achieve that which is unachievable. The resulting work, primarily video and sculptural installation, employs cyclical repetition, replication and replacement as a way of generating a push-pull tension between what is seen and what is imagined.

This interest in perceptions of “real” and “imaginary” was first brought on by previous studies of Japanese pop cultural phenomena like *anime* and *otaku* (or people with obsessive interests). Such subcultures, which strive to actualize alternative perspectives of reality, led me to evaluate my own geographical and psychological relationships. I wanted to illuminate an “imaginary” situation broken by a violent interruption as a means of understanding, what Baudrillard asserts in his *Simulacra and Simulation* as, the impossibilities of reality in our present time.

The exhibition recalls something like a Theater of the Absurd drama, presenting an artistic practice doomed to repeat itself for the sake of exposing its own meaninglessness.