

Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist



— por Cristina Sanchez-Kozyreva

How many likes do you give yourself?

As an artist whose oeuvre often likes to style itself in a self-deprecating fashion, Trevor Shimizu's works in "Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist" at Kunsthalle Lissabon have a remarkably droll interest in the life of the artist. The exhibition has the many attributes of a small retrospective, with a historical perspective spanning a period from 1998 to 2019. Still, none of the abounding autobiographical references are particularly flattering—or fault finding for that matter—but they do strike a clever balance between showing a heartfelt approach to making art and pursuing it as a career and not letting it become a means of (self)admiration.

Opening the show on the ground floor is the video *Memoir* (2005), essentially a text-only slideshow where viewers learn about Shimizu's environmentally conscious and hippie-influenced upbringing in Northern California, contextualised by a ubiquitous daily industry, some troubled characters and where Bodega Bay is both the location of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Shimizu's once drug hangout spot. Shimizu's resort to candid storytelling and anecdotal observations sets a poetic and humane tone to the whole exhibition, making it relatable for a viewer unfamiliar with his background.

The video, the show notes explain, was made when Shimizu began working at one of the first not-for-profit organisations advocating video arts in the United States, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), bringing forth the artist's involvement in this particular art form.

More video renditions further enlighten us about a younger video-experimenting Shimizu, such as *Emotional Month* (2000) where he plays a character (a variation of himself we can assume) who reminisces about a girlfriend after a break-up. He recounts taking her on Ferris wheel rides and eating cotton candy, all romantic popular culture TV tropes, while regularly breaking down crying or giggling—it's hard to say which—throughout his monologue. Convincingly, he's offering us the spectacle of a self-absorbed teenager with all its intensity and mood swings.

Shimizu's exploration of video and painting leads him to make hybrids of both. A series of canvases with central holes holding monitor screens or phone screens occupy a great part of the basement floor. In *Inside Out Toys Unboxing (Compilation): Fear, Disgust, Joy, Bing Bong, Sadness, Anger* (2017–2019) we see several videos of Shimizu's hands unwrapping his daughter toys. Here Shimizu makes a reference to online homemade videos of new products being unboxed and uses it to hint at another type of reveal, conceptually exposing his own emotions, anonymous with the *Disney Pixar* toy series he's manipulating. Other hybrid canvases are also on display, such as *Happy Friends Day* (2016–2019) that highlights Facebook's intrusive algorithms into our personal lives and connections, to leverage its own reach. Shimizu's titles often inform the works as much as their visual content, showing his agility with words as well as visual elements to convey his ideas and the vast array of personalities he's experimenting with.

The archetype of the self-pitying lonely character is apparently a recurrent theme in Shimizu's work. Another nod to this line of enquiry is found in both of the oil on canvases *Unfollowers (2)* and *Unfollowers (3)*, (both 2019): two painted renditions of screens showing the list of people who unfollowed him on Instagram. Seemingly the work acknowledges our social media obsessions and need for approval as much as it does art history, homaging Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969) in which Acconci followed a different stranger each day.

Characteristics of the healthy and unhealthy ego-related struggles related to both daily life commonplaces and personal aspirations for fame, infuse many of the works on show. One such piece pokes with humour at the way a solo exhibition potentially offers pedestal status to the stereotypical figure of the entitled and confident, but slightly tormented, male painter. The 2008 small self-portrait in oils, *Trevor Shimizu: Self Portrait Asian Heartthrob*, whose grandiloquent title seems to compensate for the simplicity of the brushstrokes and the unassertive small size of the canvas, seems to bring some friendly, if not temperate, career reassurance. According to the show notes, Shimizu didn't feel sexy until "Crazy Rich Asians", the Kevin Kwan book that was made into a movie in 2018 and was tagged as the first all-Asian Hollywood movie in 25 years (the movie was not released in Portugal). It is relevant for issues of how popular culture reflects, or not, the cultural diversity of the society it portrays.

Another notable variation of self-portrayal is the installation *Personality Research Center* (2019), composed of a dated TV and DVD player, VHS tape and DVD. Using the Enneagram Personality Test as a point of departure, in which Shimizu determined himself to be a type 4 "the individualist" personality, he offers information about other type 4 celebrities. Visitors of the show can read about Frida Khalo, Frédéric Chopin, Diana Airbus, Paris Hilton, and many more, as well as watch DVDs related to their work; the type 4 is apparently sensitive, introspective and self-absorbed but also expressive, dramatic and temperamental.

Shimizu recycles daily life and popular media clichés and rearranges them through a personal lens that is at once seductive to people with short attention spans and unexpected with its bursts of vulnerability, dealt with from a humorous distance.

And together, in this kaleidoscopic compilation of images and sounds, this sweet and sour collection of visual narratives form an intriguing portrait: one of a self-absorbed yet empathetic artist, whose doubts don't completely halt the production of eccentric works and who indirectly allows the viewers to ponder their own relationship with popular culture and social media and catch-up with their own self-knowledge pursuits.

Trevor Shimizu

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Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist. Exhibition views, Kunsthalle Lissabon. Photo: Bruno Lopes. Courtesy of Kunsthalle Lissabon.