

## **BURIED SUNS** | An exhibition by Shigeo Arikawa

Text by Vanina Saracino

A man observes the sky through the lenses of two telescopes, takes off his work uniform. Underneath, he is wearing a tight green suit that reminds us of a green screen (a technique usually employed in film production to remove or replace the background with another image); he takes a headstand pose and, suddenly, embodies the same sky he was previously observing. A group of researchers removes dubious clottings from the waters in an unnamed city. Multiple stories intertwine, at times overlapping or contradicting each other. A man wanders across dry meadows and sand shores, his interest awoken by the pine cones lying on the ground. He is looking for the right place and finds it: looks into the sun and pours a black liquid into a hole he had previously dug with his bare hands - then he buries it. What are we looking at? What can you see in these actions?

Images might have a descriptive power of their own, but only on the mere surface. Their supposed realism is, in fact, also a human invention and what often reflects from the screen is a shadow play or, as Stan Brakhage wrote, a contemporary mechanical myth. A longer gaze reveals that every image contains manifold possible interpretations, at least as many as the individuals who are looking at it. However, we expect a story narrated through moving images to lead us somewhere, as on a straight path. There is an underlying utility-driven quest in our outlook, for an objective, a purpose. The fact that we seek to comprehend the aim of a staged action, and that we take for granted that these actions should produce a meaningful result, is a cognitive behaviour highly influenced by the circumstances and characteristics of our economic system and by those of the labour market. Therefore, we will probably stare at the three works on display feeling disoriented until we haven't found an answer to the initial question 'what are these characters doing and why?'

With the three video works displayed in the exhibition Buried Suns, Arikawa's aim is to set the basis for us to indulge longer in this moment of disorientation until accepting it, until devoiding our vision of any previous knowledge or expectation. He aims at creating a temporary short-circuit that will make us start to understand or to suspect how inflexible our system of knowledge really is and how inflexible our expectations are, when caught in the act of seeing. He does so by using the particular semiotics of the linear narration in moving images - with characters, staged space, objects, actions. In fact, when faced with a staged situation in which humans are performing a certain kind of labour, we will tendentially expect it to produce an outcome, a result, to solve a situation, to reestablish some kind of order. We may find a strong inner resistances in just letting it be.

The video works exhibited, as well as Arikawa's broader artistic research, attempt at temporarily blinding our rational (or functional) understanding of human behaviour - especially that which concerns the completion of a labour, and they do it by staging purposeless actions that require a temporary suspension of knowledge, of expectations, and even of beliefs. The artist's initial interest in the multiple ways an image can be seen is rooted in a broader question: what is vision? Or, more specifically: what do we actually see when we look at images?

An implicit understanding we must assume when experiencing Arikawa's work is that the operation of looking at an image is always an addition of information to it - and it can not escape

from being partial. Adding information means making the image functioning within our own logic, which is, conversely, also shaped by personal experience, education, background, age, and even daily mood. There is no quick fix to rewind such automatisms, but a viewer who is conscious of this functioning can still hope to circuit the hole instead of falling right into it. One exercise that might come handy to avoid falling into the rational path of utility-driven interpretation is to subtract information, and it comes directly from the lesson of early experimental cinema - to *unlearn* to see, to *untrain* our vision. Mainly, these early attempts were aimed at disrupting the narrative logic of mainstream cinema and, by doing so, they were also targeting the logic of its market. Stan Brakhage's poetic exhortation stated "Imagine an eye unrulred by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception." (Metaphors on Vision, originally published in 1960)

The works that surround us in these rooms are a light shed on this process. They make us questioning it and react to it. Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tze was quoted saying 'To attain knowledge, add things everyday. To attain wisdom, remove things every day.' Knowledge - namely, the addition of data - is not to be mistaken with wisdom, which is certainly more attainable through a regressive process, one that takes a step back from the gravitational pull of things (both the information we learned and the objects we accumulated) and of the multi-layered social order that has been imposed to us and that has, by consequence, deeply influenced our ways of seeing.

Opposed to most of the early experimental cinema abstract visual results, Arikawa's work stages a figurative and also sometimes verbally developed world. It does not induce us to abandon the idea of meaning or the structure of perspective and the logic of composition, but he focuses on the need to abandon the rational use of the actions staged instead. In this aspect, his work is both readable as a research on vision and as a direct questioning of the way our vision is influenced and driven by the same logic of the market: utility, efficiency, speed among others.

Burying the sun might not be the most profitable nor useful activity, but Arikawa's buried suns are not metaphors either. Instead, they may be closer to Alfred Hitchcock's MacGuffins - objects that are central to the narration but that have no purpose and no appearance, even though the story develops thanks to and around them. These articulated plot devices, in fictional narrative, are never seen nor directly addressed but are outlined by the effects that they have on the narration and on the viewers instead. Hitchcock himself offers an obscure explanation of the MacGuffins because the idea is exactly to avoid any explicit description that would narrow down the viewer's universe of possible interpretations, to avoid clarifications. And, at least in film, that kind of light is not always the best element to set the true vision in motion.

Arikawa's work aims at stopping our search for a useful outcome, and yet he urges us to interpret also through the comprehensive title of this series, (Re)interpretation. One of the works included in the show, Gold Town, is even referred to as a (Re)(Re)interpretation - a meta-interpretation, or the film equivalent of a labyrinth in which the interpretation is already part of the work itself, even before we experience it. In this work, the verbal narration we listen to is the result of exposing a group of viewers to include their own remixed interpretations in the final work currently exhibited - which is now there for us to interpret, again.