

Paper Views

words and portrait | Martin Wong
art | Gina Osterloh



Blank Attempt Where My Face Fell Off (Time to Shed), 2008
Lambda Photography, 11" x 14"

The photography of Gina Osterloh is high art, but touches the viewer on a no-bullshit, almost primal level. She uses cuttings of cheap, pastel office paper to depict guts, puke, hair, and orifices—and often the environment, as well—to blur the boundaries between body and background. As a result, the colors are pretty in the UC Irvine Art School graduate's large-format prints, but the effect is uneasy. Gina's works have affected viewers around the U.S. as well as in Asia, but I met the artist at her Los Angeles studio, not far from her most recent show at Chung King Project gallery.

GR: When you started art school, were you already interested in photography?

GO: More like video. I did a piece where I was hitting a tennis ball across all of San Francisco.

GR: Video is not a popular art. The average guy doesn't go to LACMA and head straight to the video room.

GO: Right. I got into video when I did postproduction for a nonprofit called BAVC in San Francisco. We did stuff for PBS and NAATA. Different documentaries would come through, like *The Weather Underground* by Sam Green.

GR: Did you take part in the video shorts programs at San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival and all that?

GO: I'd go, but I wasn't making shorts. My stuff was more abstract.

GR: When did you get into still photography?

GO: I had been shooting randomly since undergrad, but at the end of my first year of grad school, a professor wasn't using his office, so I asked if I could use it and built a tropical landscape. It's such a cliché—landscape, sunset and palm trees—but I was completely infatuated with it when I moved to L.A.



Untitled (Turquoise Room #4), 2007
Lambda Photography, 48" x 60"

GR: Had that first photo series been percolating in your head for a while?

GO: That one almost felt traumatic when I made it. I spent so much time on it and couldn't let it go. It was the first "set" I made, and I wasn't able to verbalize exactly why I was making it. I think it was just an accumulation of moving to L.A. and thinking about stories that my mom had told me. I had never been to the Philippines, but I thought about landscapes that she would talk about. She was there during WWII, so they were always connoted with war.

GR: Not a tropical fantasy thing.

GO: But maybe confused with that, too, with film and tourism.

GR: When you look back at that project, what do you think?

GO: I kind of see the roots of it all. I was infatuated with the sunset and wanting to relinquish oneself to this greater color field. I realized the gesture of rapture was the same as a police holdup. I made right another, more flattened version of this set after I came back from the Philippines in 2006. I was still in grad school.

GR: What was the reason for that trip?

GO: I was in the middle of my MFA, and I was like, "Holy shit, I haven't been to the Philippines!" I wanted to meet Louie Cordero and other artists there.

GR: What was it like going from an academic art setting to the Philippines? The Manila scene seems very indie to me, with a lot of galleries that are also coffee joints.

GO: Right. All the galleries have a bar, a coffee shop, or a small restaurant to support themselves and stay open. I think my biggest shock was when I saw a large group of galleries in this location called Megamall—literally a five-floor mall with one floor having all these well-respected galleries.

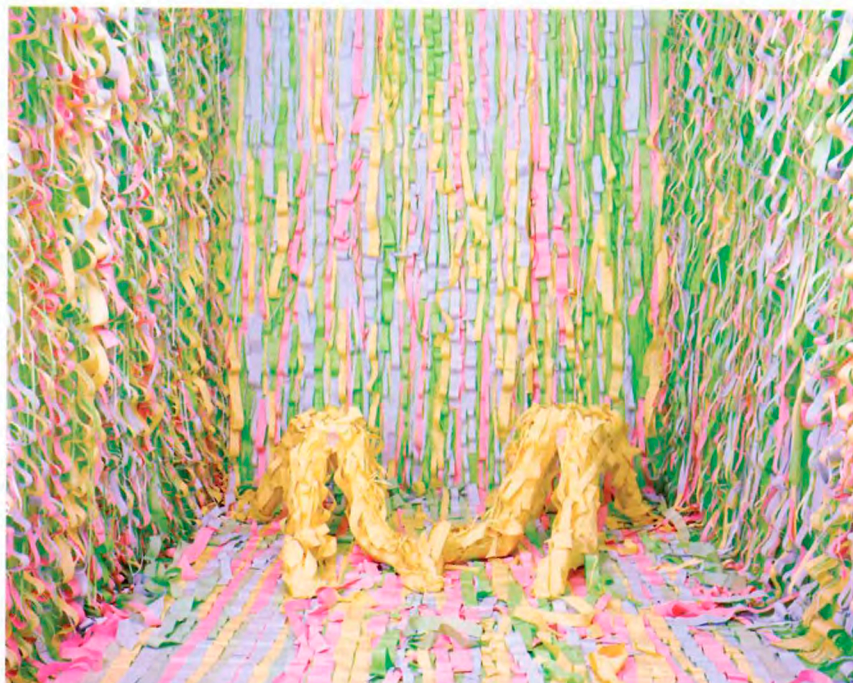
GR: You grow up in the U.S. thinking malls are lame, but in Southeast Asia everyone goes to the mall when it gets hot.

GO: It's so true, and temperature and humidity definitely became influences in my work. I think about ways the body isn't quite defined or lacks a forced boundary between oneself and the environment.



Burnt Out, Died, Got Some Rest, and Then Waited #2 (Somewhere Tropical), 2005
Lambda Photography, 40" x 40"

I don't want to be "the paper lady." It's just a material that makes sense with the metaphors I'm interested in.



Cuts (Pairs), 2008
Lambda Photography, 30" x 38"

GR: How long were you there?

GO: I was there for only ten days that trip. It went by so fast.

GR: You probably wondered how to get back and have someone else pay for it.

GO: Yes! And I felt so fortunate because it wasn't even the Fulbright that brought me back the next time; it was a show called *Galleon Trade*. A San Francisco artist named Jennifer Wofford curated a show based on the Galleon trade route, which recently traveled to the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in S.F.

GR: I'm sure the Fulbright Scholarship allowed you to stay there for a much longer time. How did you convince the board to pay for your year in the Philippines?

GO: I proposed two parts. I said, "I want to make a new body of work and exhibit it, but at the same time researching contemporary art in Manila." Originally, my proposal was contemporary art meets realism, because I was interested in Louie Cordero's work, and his use of juxtaposition and insane imagery. But it shifted focus to this group of artists that were influenced by this professor from the '60s, who is still teaching today, named Roberto Chabet, and he taught at the University of Philippines for a long time.

GR: Were you familiar with Chabet's work?

GO: I was just introduced, really. I spoke a lot with Ringo Bunoan, who is an amazing artist and is also an archivist of all of his work and for all exhibitions in the Philippines for the Asian Art Archive. I also hung out with other artists who had really strong conceptual drives in their work, such as Poklong Anading, Lena Cobangbang, Gary Ross Pastrana, and MMYU.

GR: How was your personal work affected?

GO: I was focused with intense studio time and got to know as many artists as possible. I discovered this office paper made in Manila that only comes in four colors. At first I was attracted to the paper because it is non-reflective and we all know what it feels like; it's just office paper. It's in these paper shops, and no matter which shop it is, there is the same paper, same four colors, and the same size sheets. There isn't any OfficeMax so there's no middleman and it's really cheap. I was walking around Chinatown and they had a row of paper shops.

GR: Your earlier images seemed very focused with a figure, props, and a background, and then you just blew everything up and reconstructed the world in these four colors.

Were you taking drugs? Did you have a nightmare or bad food?

GO: I was fed up with the tropical themes and familiar icons like camouflaged pants, gray suits, and sunsets. But I was still really interested in the metaphor of camouflage, so I moved it beyond the simple language of military and war, and started asking, what are these boundaries of a body? Do they extend into the room itself?

GR: You've been using a medium-format Hasselblad all along?

GO: Well, these are 4" x 5", which defines my practice in a way. With any of the spaces, I'm looking through the ground of the 4" x 5" glass before I even start building it up. Then I go back into the space, tape out what I can see, and build up to the edges of the view.

GR: The way you construct your sets is very technical, but the cutting of paper seems very raw—as if a third grader cut it up with small scissors. I don't mean that as an insult...

GO: It's important to me that you would know what the paper feels like, and that it's a familiar material.

GR: The piece where the figure is vomiting colored paper with hair over her face recalls Japanese horror movies.

GO: The visual cue in certain Japanese horror films of the woman with the faceless head of hair is very unsettling. However, the contexts are completely different. In *Ringu*, the woman with the faceless head is a ghost with malicious intent is to get revenge. My use is a strategy to disrupt basic identity formation—in many ways, in response to the question, "So where are you from?"

GR: Do audiences in the Philippines see your work the same way you do?

GO: I felt like there was a very active dialogue between my work, my friends' work, my friends, fellow artists, and viewers. I think one thing that was a little bit different, was that photography in the Philippines is still gaining credit as being a solid art form. But spaces such as Silverlens Gallery and Green Papaya Art Projects are shifting the paradigm.

GR: Do you think of yourself as primarily a photographer?

GO: Yeah, maybe photography based? So much time is spent building the rooms, and the photo part happens in just one day. Then they exist as photographs.

GR: The colors are very pleasing, but the body is never comfortable looking, never in a state of ease. The person in the pink



Blind Rash, 2008
Lambda Photography, 30" x 38"

room appears to be in a giant stomach! You seem like a happy enough person, but is there turmoil underneath?

GO: The pink shapes are supposed to resemble skin cells. It may seem like I just think about broad topics, and I actually do. I'm really interested in what is normal, and why the way we hold ourselves is considered normal. We participate in this social code that writes itself onto our bodies, and without this social code, how would we even function?

It's not something that is in the forefront of my work, but growing up mixed-race in Ohio where people are always asking, "Well, what are you?" is always an influence. I remember I had a really bad sock tan because I played a lot of tennis, and this girl at the public pool yelled out across the pool, "Hey, are you white or black?" It wasn't even a question of, "Are you white or Asian?" It was white or black. I was the only Asian person at my school, but I was half. So I was constantly misrecognized, and maybe it shows in the work when the body is present but it remains anonymous.

GR: The earlier pieces were not necessarily autobiographical, but you were definitely the model. Since then, you've had friends pose and now you are using papier-mâché figures.

GO: Well, it was a pure process thing. Working with papier-mâché, I didn't have to say, "Move your chin slightly more to the left." Also, someone had written about my earlier work, and they had positioned it as strictly feminine. I was like, "Oh, is it just because I've been using myself?" So I tried to figure out how I could make work about the body but have it be genderless.

Also, with the papier-mâché, it really makes this porous boundary between the body and its environment, and the camouflage metaphor is even more emphasized.

GR: Now that you're back in L.A., it would probably be expensive to buy reams of office paper at stores like xpedx or Kelly Paper. Where are you going to get paper now?

GO: I have a stash. Actually, I was used to wide rolls of craft paper from Pearl, and when I could only find smaller ones, it kind of shifted my process, I was like, "Well, I'll just cut these rooms," and that process lent itself to the work.

GR: As it gets more deconstructed, how much rawer can you get? Eventually, are you just going to hang meat from the walls?

GO: We'll see what happens, because I don't want to be "the paper lady." It's just a material that makes sense with the metaphors I'm interested in.

NAME GINA OSTERLOH	
OCCUPATION ARTIST / EDUCATOR	BLOOD TYPE O
BIRTHPLACE SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS	RESIDENCE LA, CA
ASIAN ZODIAC RAT!	WESTERN ZODIAC AQUARIUS
MOVIE/TV SHOW HOLY MOUNTAIN, ALEJANDRO JODOROWSKY MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON, MAYA DEREN	
BAND/MUSICAL ARTIST L.O.C. (LOSS OF CONTROL), MANILA	
WEBSITE/BLOG www.ginaosterloh.com / www.myspace/djlenqua bigskymind.multiply.com (friend Ringo...)	
T-SHIRT/ARTICLE OF CLOTHING ROMEO LEE T-SHIRT	
FOOD CHICKEN RICE	
COLLECTION MY PHOTO NEGATIVES	
GAME/HOBBY/SPORT PING PONG / SURFING	
TURNING POINT(S) ONE L.A. SUMMER NIGHT.	
PROUDEST MOMENT(S) SWIMMING WITH WHALESHARKS	
IF I COULD REDO SOMETHING IN LIFE, IT WOULD BE 17	
WHY I EXIST TO FIGURE OUT WHAT TO MAKE NEXT!!	



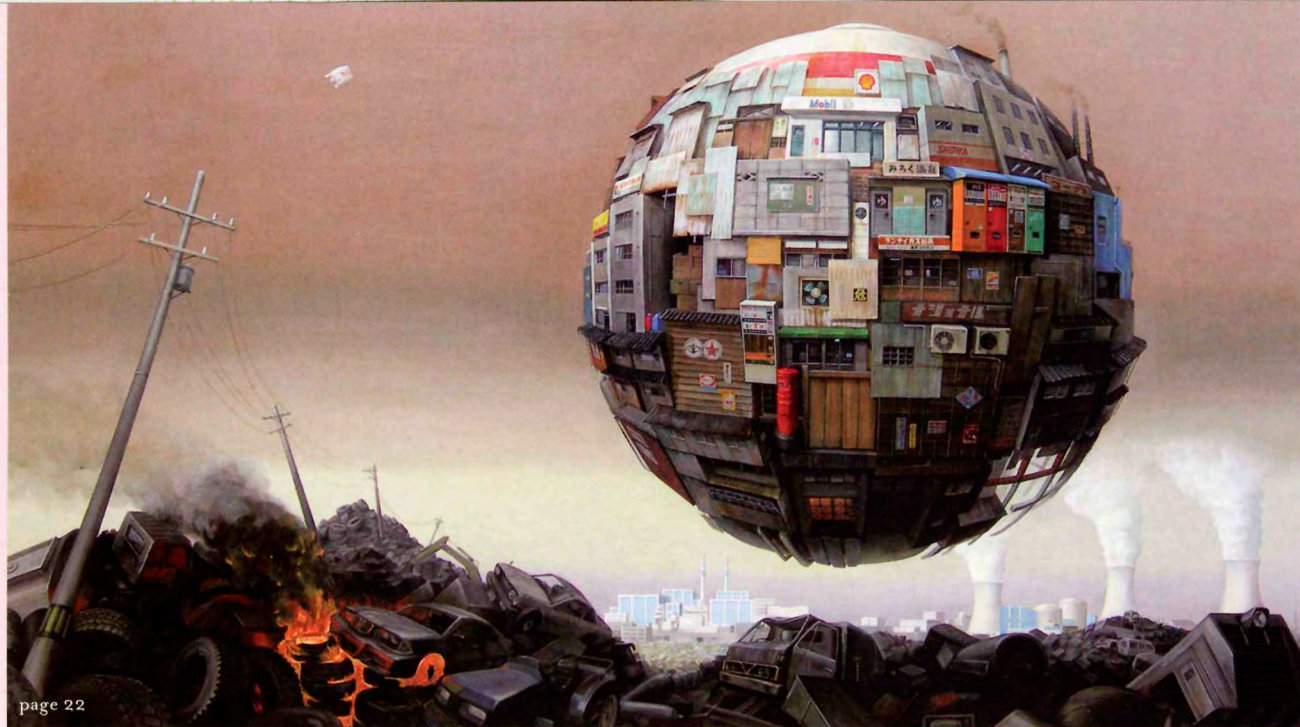
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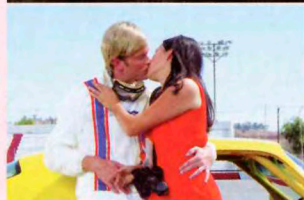
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KIYOSHI KUROSAWA • DEPARTURES • CHOCOLATE
TOKYO! TALES • SICHUAN SWEAT • SEVENTIES SMUT
CUTE BENTO • MAFIA MAN • MASAKATSU SASHIE





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