



**Hirokazu Fukawa** is interested in re-experiencing and re-creating moments of personal epiphany through art and wants his work to be a reminder of this kind of experience. Fukawa attended Waseda University in Tokyo and later received his MFA in Sculpture from the Rhode Island School of Design. He has shown work at The Trakt Project Raum in Berlin, Germany, Gallery Coco in Kyoto, Japan and the ARC Gallery in Chicago, Illinois. Fukawa is an Associate Professor in the sculpture department at the University of Hartford Art School in West Hartford, Connecticut.

**Olu Oguibe** is currently an Artist and a Professor of Art and Art History at the University of Connecticut. Beyond his extensive contribution to the literary art field, Dr. Oguibe's work has been exhibited in museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, Migros Museum in Zurich, the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and most recently the 2007 Venice Biennial. He has also served as curator and co-curator for numerous exhibitions including the Tate Modern in London, Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art in Genoa and Albisola, Italy, the Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa in and out of Africa for the 49th Venice Biennale and City Museum in Mexico City.

Above: 2009 installation view at Real Art Ways of *The Third International* and *Blizzard* (mixed media installations, dimensions variable, 2009).

# REAL ART WAYS

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Real Art Ways is one of the leading contemporary arts organizations in the United States, with a record of linking artists, innovation and community. Programs include visual arts, with exhibitions, public art projects, and artist presentations; cinema, with independent and international films 7 nights a week; music; performance; literary events; education programming; and social events that provide people with opportunities to connect with one another around art and ideas.



On the cover: *Blizzard*, wood, fluorescent light with strip fixture, dimensions variable, 2009 (detail).

Below: *Starvation 3*, mixed media, 24" x 42", 2008.

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# HIROKAZU FUKAWA

*A Thought at the Edge of the Continent:  
Manchuria to Siberia 1942-1947*



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ART WAYS

# ILLUMINATIONS, OR JOURNEYS TOWARD LIGHT

By Olu Oguibe

βλεπομεν γαρ αρτι δι εσοπτρου εν αιγιματι  
("For now we see through a glass, darkly.")

—Paul's First Epistle to The Corinthians, 13:12

What strikes us first about Hirokazu Fukawa's work is form. It is evident, tangible and consummate, and almost monumental and minimalist in its austere disregard for flourish and its devotion to manufacture. We see the artist's hand in the plain, rough, industrial three-by-fours that appear in his installations, we see it in the joinery, the welded steel or etched stone slab, the home-made armature or pedestal which, stripped of all artifice, further directs our focus to the essence of the work.

Over the past two decades, beginning, some would say, with the likes of Thomas Hirschhorn, mainstream installation art settled for burlesque and the carnivalesque, and much of what was celebrated existed in the mall strip of the banal and decadent where conventions were reduced to a flurry of household junk, prayer flags, and salvaged bric-a-brac thrown together in a festive riot that offered the viewer almost nothing but visual noise. With this jumble of camp and glitter ascendant as the dominant language of installations, it became more difficult to locate the intersection between installation art and conceptual art, or find much evidence of rigorous intellect, which was and ought to be the foundation of conceptual art.

Throughout that period, however, Fukawa maintained a clean and eloquent diction that is spare and direct, yet adventurous and arresting. The result is an uncommon simplicity and inescapable elegance, sometimes soaring, at other times simply serene, even with the roughness around the edges, always poetic in spite of subject matter. Fukawa makes light humor of the current, prevalent disconnect between form and concept in contemporary installation and conceptual art by pointing out that the pursuit of idea by form is an infinite one: the more form runs after idea, the further the latter escapes, just like in Achilles's interminable race with the tortoise in the old Greek fable. However, his point is far weightier than that, and on one very significant level reflects his own serious dedication to the challenges and vagaries of that pursuit while, on another, it points to his deep interest in the philosophy of being and the impossibility of perfection. Here we are reminded of the artist's avid fascination for the work of Jorge Luis Borges, who shared that interest in the irrefutable nature of being, and our inevitable fate as participants and elements in a divine riddle.

"The artist is an enigma machine that ciphers one riddle after another to invite viewers to an intricate path of wonder," Fukawa writes "One might find something unexpected there." Of course, this "intricate path of wonder" is the Labyrinth of Borges's lifelong obsession, the mysterious garden of forking paths where time and events reveal themselves as coincidences but in forms that are unanticipated or already experienced. Sometimes what we find was already and always there, as Dr. Yu Tsun and his host discovered in Borges's "*El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*" when it finally struck him that the book and maze that his ancestor Ts'ui Pen promised to produce were not two projects as pre-

*Blizzard*, wood, fluorescent light with strip fixture, dimensions variable, 2009.



Three-channel video installation, 2008.

viously believed by scholars, but one and the same, even as events in his own life, quite to the contrary, produced not a collation or collapse of meanings but a simultaneous proliferation of other events. For Fukawa the nature or detail of such realizations—let us call them revelations or illuminations—is not always as important as the adventure that leads us to them, and certainly not as exciting, exhilarating, or life changing. The greatest meaning, quite often, is the wonder that we experience as we wander, the odyssey *itself*, through the labyrinths of life.

And so it is that the artist's elaborate project and exhibition, *A Thought at The Edge of the Continent: Manchuria to Siberia 1942–1947*, began as a quest to recover, retrace, experience and reconstruct his father's odyssey as a Japanese prisoner of war in Stalin's prison camps after World War II. Three generations of the Fukawa family left Japan to move to the northern Chinese territory of Manchuria in search of work. Manchuria, of course, was a historically unstable territory that had been coveted and contested for centuries by the two great empires that bracketed China, Russia and Japan. Having invaded and occupied the territory in 1931, Japan declared it a new, independent state in 1932 and invited the deposed, former child emperor of China, Pu-yi, last of the Qing dynasty, to take over as puppet emperor of the new state. The vassal empire was called Manchukuo.

There it was in July 1945 that Fukawa's father, a draftsman, was conscripted into the dwindling imperial Japanese army after the Allied Nations and the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and Hirohito's forces made their last stand. Disheveled, poorly trained and equipped, and lacking clear command as Japan redirected its best efforts to face the Allied armies in the South Pacific, the Japanese Kwantung forces in Manchukuo were quickly and easily routed by the Red Army and taken prisoner en masse, along with every able-bodied Japanese male in Manchuria. Many were bundled off into Siberia and Ukraine by cattle train while others, like Fukawa's father, were marched across on foot over the barren territory into the Soviet Union. There 600,000 of them would languish in labor camps under circumstances reminiscent of those brutal conditions that the world first learnt about through Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's debut novella, *One Day in The Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Toiling under sub-zero temperatures and often with little or no food, living mostly underground encaved in the dripping ice, thousands of them perished. Former air force officer Nobuo Kiuchi, who was held in camps across Ukraine, tells of prisoners shedding "icicle tears" at the burials of their friends because tears froze instantly on their faces in the unimaginably cold temperatures in which they lived and worked.

As a young father, the senior Fukawa told his children about the war and the prison camps, but as he got older and the memories receded into his past, he spoke less about them. By the time his son returned to the story a few years ago, which was more than sixty years after the fact, Mr. Fukawa had developed Alzheimer's disease and his power of recall was all but completely gone. The silence had become eternal. Whatever could be gleaned of his past now was like looking in a dark mirror. The narrative was no longer his but others', fragments of fact and fiction, knowledge removed from the visceral plane where only experience has access. His story had become an unreadable book.

Nonetheless, Hirokazu Fukawa set out across Manchuria and Siberia in pursuit of those fragments of his father's harrowing past, confident that whatever was lived can be retraced and recovered. He mapped the trails and tracked down the sites, and traveled from one prison camp to another hoping for an emotional connection, some kind of understanding. But try as he may, he could not find that connection or reach that understanding, because the past speaks to us differently. Sites may possess memories, and sites of horror even more so, but those memories are beyond translation. Their horrors are impenetrable and the experience non-transferable. "Pile them high at Austerlitz and Waterloo," Carl Sandburg wrote in his famous poem, "Grass," "And pile the bodies high at Gettysburg/Shovel them under, and let me work./Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:/What place is this?/Where are we now?" Sites, too, are unreadable books. Time draws a veil over the past, leaving only mirrors and hidden points of light. But those points of light, when we find them, reveal not one past but all pasts, not one story but all stories. They are the Aleph that Borges found lying on his back in the basement studio of Carlos Argentino in his story of the same title, that point where all points in the universe converge, and all narratives and all history merge into the long, infinite story of the species.

Light is an important and recurrent element in Hirokazu Fukawa's work, light as luminance, as a source and object of enchantment, light as illumination. In *A Thought at The Edge of The Continent*, he puts it to glorious visceral and metaphorical use. *Blizzard*, the central installation in the exhibition, is a phalanx of 60 long, fluorescent lights propped on a forest of tall, leaning wooden poles to recreate the visual effect of a Siberian blizzard, each

tube and strand recalling the thick, stony pellets of a winter storm. The effect is both blinding and mesmerizing. However, it is not without reason that the installation is at the center of the project. Ironically, in Stalin's numerous labor camps, the deadly Siberian blizzard was often a lifesaver. Solzhenitsyn's protagonist in *One Day in The Life of Ivan Denisovich* tells us that each winter the men in the prison camps prayed for blizzards, because for as long as a blizzard lasted, they were spared from working outdoors. And there is, of course, the greater irony, which is the terrible beauty of a Siberian winter storm. While searching for the cruel tracks of history, Fukawa settles on nature, which is the summary of all things, the beastly and the beautiful, the benign and the deadly, the past, the present, and all the futures rolled into one abstract, illuminated moment.

Where history makes its appearance in Fukawa's project, it does so in the equally grand metaphor of a version of Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to The Third International*, which Fukawa presents in the exhibition. Conceived and proposed in 1919, the year of the triumph of the Soviet revolution, Tatlin's visionary—yet never-realized—monument came to symbolize the utopia of the international communist movement to which it was dedicated, and the irony of the Soviet empire that suppressed and succeeded it. In *A Thought at The Edge of The Continent* Fukawa's reproduction or parody of the Tatlin monument represents not one but several utopias, one the Soviet state, the other the divine imperial realm of Greater Japan of which Manchukuo was a colonial outpost, and of course, the utopia of Hitler's thousand-year Reich, the invincible global Aryan nation, with which Japan threw its lot at the end of the war. The monumental efforts to realize these utopias led to some of history's greatest tragedies, with millions of lives sacrificed and entire cultures and civilizations disrupted and almost completely destroyed. Generations were fed to the dogs of war, lives and lineages scarred forever. In the end, the empires crumbled like all empires do, and the men who dream and created and drove the great machines that drove them, inevitably went the way of all mortals. In their grand mausoleums they lie shriveled and defeated, ultimately beaten by the greater mystery, which is time.

In another section of Fukawa's project he presents an elaborate, poetic video piece in which he intersperses images from his journey through Manchuria and Siberia with those of his father struggling to remember, while he meditates on the meaning and futility of all journeys to the past. We see beautiful images of dreamy landscapes, fragments of wondrous nature, and an old man who in his last years stubbornly revels in the serenity that he has earned. The crimes of the past are buried with the past even as their repercussions survive into the present. The artist speaks of the voids that he encountered in the course of his search, but the fact of the matter is that there are no voids: every patch of darkness is also a place of discovery, a moment of revelation. And as his video piece eloquently demonstrates, even when the past seems to disappear in a foggy labyrinth, and knowledge crumbles at the touch like plaster on old ruins, certain fundamentals nevertheless survive: among them nature, beauty, and the creative impulse.

*A Thought at The Edge of The Continent* is Hirokazu Fukawa's journey through his father, and through the tragic intersections of Japan's colonial history and the grand events of the 20th century. It is, also, an artist's response to that journey as he strives to match idea with form, bridge the past and the present, and build narrative around memory. It is a struggle and a triumph, a search and a lesson, an effort at resolution. As we stand at the edge of the continent with Fukawa, there is but one last thought, which is that in the end, we see only through a glass darkly, and every memory, every life, every narrative, every knowledge, discovery, or creative effort, is a fragment of a greater narrative, a moment of modest illumination as we journey from darkness toward light.



*Starvation 1*, mixed media, 24" x 42", 2008.