

GALLERY-GOING

Storytelling, Stall by Stall

By JOHN GOODRICH

Like a great many younger artists today, Tabaimo (b. 1975) combines a number of media and jumps the mixture with new technologies. What sets this Japanese video artist apart is the discipline and insight with which she updates one very traditional genre. Her images of contemporary urban scenes, rendered in the style of ukiyo-e woodblocks, attain a strange and unnerving beauty, thanks to her exquisite skills as an illustrator, her filmmaker's instincts, and her subtle but quirky social perceptions. A rising star in the art scene in Japan, the artist has been gaining global recognition in recent years, and produced a commissioned piece for the Venice Biennale 2007.

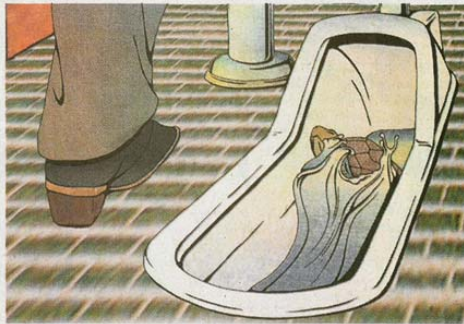
**TABAIMO**

James Cohan Gallery

Her second show at James Cohan features two video installations and another of drawings. The most impressive of these works is the six-minute video "public conVENIENCE" (2006), which turns a large women's restroom into a staging ground for telling and macabre events. (The emphasized "VEN" preserves the original Japanese title's punning of "public," "excrement," and "woman.") Though computer animated, the images are initially drawn by hand, with strong, simplified contours, vivid colors, and patterning reminiscent of Hokusai. Meticulous details — of a moth alighting on a wall, or of self-generating graffiti, or mirrors' reflections of passing figures — show an enchanting mix of the scrupulous and the fanciful.

The ukiyo-e aesthetic lends itself surprisingly well to a very up-to-date presentation, with scenes projected onto three walls joined at converging angles. A ramp between the walls tilts slightly upward at the back, enhancing the sensation of a deep, perspectival space. The tight coordination of movements across the three walls gives an uncanny impression of figures moving physically through this enclosed area. They sometimes have the tremors of low-budget anime and, in videogame fashion, the entire restroom setting occasionally rotates to present a new view. These attributes of the digital age, however, fit seamlessly into Tabaimo's ukiyo-e-styled world.

It has an intuitive tidiness. It takes several view-



JAMES COHAN

A still from Tabaimo's 'public conVENIENCE' (2006).

ings to fully absorb the choreography of events, but gallery visitors will soon gather that each of four women has claims to a particular sink and stall, in which curious events unfold in deftly edited sequences. A cell phone plunges into a toilet, prompting an extraordinary rescue attempt. A turtle, stoutly refusing to be flushed down one toilet, finally acquiesces, bearing a newborn baby through a Hokusai-like swirl of waves. The outside world is present only as anonymous male hands, which release moths with ominously clicking apertures for eyes. These infiltrate the restroom, flitting about and taking pictures at the most intimate moments. Suggestions of violence, violation, and self-protective obsessions suffuse the space of the restroom — as does, too, the desolation of unconnected lives in an exotic world.

The second video installation, the four-minute "haunted house" (2003), features a single, circular projection that sweeps back and forth across the gallery wall, allowing glimpses of a large city's apartment buildings. The viewer becomes an unwitting voyeur, scanning moments of private lives as if through a rotating telescope.

The first sweeping scan shows no people at all but, on the second, small, neat figures appear in their various cubicles. A man stabs a woman, while a golfer practices swings on a patio. A woman works at a computer, oblivious to the man who has hanged himself in the apartment above. Three people eat at a table.

On subsequent sweeps, the figures grow into shimmering giants with disturbing habits. The golfer's swing demolishes a building; a grandmother impassively devours the tiny per-

son in her bowl. Throughout these events, a jazzy music soundtrack breezes along, turning to jarring notes at strategic points. The sprightly mayhem of "haunted house" sets a very different tone from "public conVENIENCE," yet both videos show the artist's quirky viewpoint liberated by a highly disciplined structure.

The small front gallery at James Cohan features an installation of the artist's pen-and-ink drawings of fingers and toes, joined in impossible, writhing combinations. These flow across the surfaces of numerous panels and sheets of paper mounted on two walls. Even more unsettling are the multitudes of shiny, highly detailed insect parts emerging from knuckles and pockets of skin. In an opposite wall, four rectangular holes have been cut, allowing the light from the street to filter through translucent drawings installed in each opening. Close inspection shows similar throngs of fingers drawn on one side of each sheet; on the other side, darkly rendered bits of insects pack the same outline.

The drawings exude an organic malevolence reminiscent of the films of David Lynch. But they suffer next to the artist's own videos. They seem a little overly clever, as if designed chiefly to unnerve, in a stylized way. By comparison, "public conVENIENCE" reaches for something beyond special effects or social commentary, and finds a coherent poetic vision. It reminds us that technique and technology count for little without temperament and insight.

Until April 12 (533 W. 26th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-714-9500).