



# Reclaiming Narrative

Gabriel Bizen Akagawa

Heather-Marie Davis

Patrice Duhamel  
& D.Kimm

June Pak



Visiting Artists  
2006  
in Residency

**ALTERNATOR**  
gallery for contemporary art

During the summer of 2006, the Alternator Gallery for Contemporary Art invited five artists to participate in a project designed to encourage dialogue about innovative art practices. These artists – Gabriel Bizen Akagawa, Heather-Marie Davis, Patrice Duhamel, D. Kimm and June Pak – were invited to live and work in Kelowna and to incorporate local issues into their creative production. By bringing contemporary art practices to a regional audience in its own locale, these artists were challenged to make sometimes obscure and often ephemeral forms of cultural production more accessible to a local public. *Reclaiming Narrative*, the title given to the project, reflected a desire to strengthen the exchange between artists and audiences and to initiate a conversation about culture and its relation to community. This dialogue was to be achieved through creative exchanges in which local stories were retold through the materials and techniques of contemporary art.

This project pursued several questions: Who is the audience for contemporary art? What does contemporary art mean for the general public? Why should they be interested, involved, even excited? For much alternative art, the audience is often just a small group of individuals who share similar educational backgrounds. Does this mean that contemporary art is a closed conversation? Is it limited to individuals informed about conceptual art practices? One of the premises of this residency is that art should not be elitist and should

be accessible to the general public. Yet the idea of a general public remains difficult to define and interest from people outside the arts community can be hard to achieve. At times, contemporary exhibitions upset regional audiences unfamiliar with innovative work and result in public controversies that rarely happen in larger urban centres. In the face of these realities, one strategy for this residency was for artists to communicate in a direct way with specific groups of people by targeting individuals in the community united by similar interests or backgrounds. The intimacy of the connection between the artists and these audiences allowed residents to ask questions, share histories and experience the direct translation of their stories into the languages of contemporary art.

Many contemporary artists seek to reposition the objective of art as an engagement involving the direct participation of the viewer. Diminishing the importance of the art object and focusing instead on building a relationship with the audience emphasizes exchange as two-way communication rather than as consumer practice. Narrative within this model challenges the dominant narrative format familiar to contemporary audiences through mass-media programming and allows narrative to return to its historical origins as a practice of sharing information and personal contact. The audience, by creating a shared dialogue, participates in the production of contemporary art, reclaiming artistic expression – and narrative – as both personal and cultural experience.

Jennifer Pickering  
Exhibition Director

# Gabriel Bizen Akagawa

Gabriel Bizen Akagawa is an artist of Japanese American ancestry born in Minnesota and living in Chicago. He received an MFA in 2004 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA in 1995 from Macalester College in Minnesota. He is an instructor in the Sculpture Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Akagawa's work includes sculptural objects, installations, video, sound, free massages and other events. He has exhibited in Illinois and Minnesota.



Dismantled ponderosa pine, 2006



*This cardboard tree is a memorial to Ponderosa pines and other trees lost in the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park Fire, as well as the ongoing loss of trees due to lapses in recycling.*



*When arriving in Kelowna, British Columbia, my wife, Anne, and I were greeted by our driver. We loaded our luggage into the van and headed towards downtown. "It is unusually green right now," Jim said. "We have received a lot of rain, it is usually brown and dangerous for fires." This how we first learned of the fire of 2003, on multiple levels. I listen to people's stories to direct my actions. I let free resources to dictate my objects. I use the tree as a symbol to connect to a place's history and stories.*

*- Gariel Bizen Akagawa*



Akagawa collecting material for his installation, 2006

Gabriel Bizen Akagawa situates his work in the realm of the city, constructing waste-paper sculptures as a reminder of the environmental impact of contemporary patterns of urban consumption. Launching his message at a mayoral breakfast and enlisting the help of local school children, he relays this narrative within an official setting, firmly situating his critique as both public and political.

While Akagawa's social engagement is direct, his collections of accounts and statements are not. His stories are lodged in layer upon layer of text collected from collaborators, then either dispersed or built into masses. He works with the records of contemporary society – whether children's notebooks and business accounts or advertising flyers and magazines. The narrative his work holds is larger than any single sheet; collectively they are a reflection on our accumulations, concerns and spheres of influence. Unreadable yet not obscure, they illustrate the cumulative effect of individual actions on the natural environment.



Some 60 children from Springfield Elementary School in Kelowna wrote their ideas about pollution on slips of paper attached to biodegradable balloons that were released at a breakfast hosted by Mayor Sharon Shepherd. One balloon was found and several days later Akagawa received this e-mail message:

*Hello, my name is Benson from Welling Alberta Canada. That's just south of Lethbridge Alberta. We live on a farm and we found the balloon and note in our field. That's crazy how it went over the mountains. And to write my feelings on pollution: Don't you guys pollute because it's coming straight to me.*

*Benson*



Mayoral breakfast, Kelowna BC, 2006

# Heather-Marie Davis

Heather-Marie Davis is a multimedia artist based in Philadelphia. Davis has an MA in Arts Administration from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BA in Fine Arts from Florida A&M University. She currently teaches at Cheyney University in Pennsylvania. Davis has exhibited and curated throughout the U.S. including Illinois, South Carolina, Florida and New York.



Aprons, installation, 2006



Heather-Marie Davis repatriates obscure folk stories for the present. Her work involves researching and re-appropriating tales from both oral traditions and other historical sources. She approaches representation from a personal perspective, blending these stories with the histories of her own family. While in Kelowna, Davis met with members of Kelowna's small Black community and recorded their tales, including personal accounts of current-day discrimination in Canada. Each narrative, through the act of being told and recorded, becomes part of contemporary mythology, effecting a transformation of the personal into the cultural.



Mixed media collage, instalation , 2006



*In Kelowna, B.C., there are 315 people who are defined as Black by the census. The number of Blacks living in Kelowna astonished all of the people I interviewed. One woman suggested that perhaps many of the Blacks counted in the census were actually adopted children from Haiti.*

- Heather-Marie Davis

*I came to attend school, at the college. There was a gentleman living accross from my dorm room and when I went out to thow garbage he was so mad at me, and he was like using the F word at me and the N word telling me to get out or go back to where I came from. I was shocked cause I don't know what I had done to this gentleman and in my life I have never experience anything like that. So that was the first time I think, the only incident that was outright, outright towards me. Maybe there have been other times when people have done these things but I tend to know that I am not going to be accepted everywhere. So I pretend to be very reserved and keep to myself and not look at those things. Like I totally pretended I didn't know what was going on.*

- Cecilia

Originally from Eastern Africa Cecelia has lived in Kelowna for two years and in Canada for eight years



*Social Constructs: Race Relations in Kelowna (Cecilia second from right), video still, 2006*

# Patrice Duhamel & D.Kimm

Patrice Duhamel works in video, drawing, improvised music and critical writing. His installations have been exhibited nationally in Montreal, Chicoutimi and Rouyn-Noranda and internationally in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. His single-channel videos have been screened in numerous festivals in Canada, Europe and the U.S.

D. Kimm is a multidisciplinary artist from Montreal. She is the artistic director of Les Filles Electriques whose mandate is to create and produce interdisciplinary events and works of oral, written and electronic literature. Kimm has published several books including *La Suite Mongole* (Planète Rebelle, 2001).



*La mariée perpetuelle*, video still, 2006



Patrice Duhamel (left) and D.Kimm (right), spoken word performance, Kelowna, 2006



*La mariée perpétuelle*, Video still, 2006

This collaboration, which involved interviewing and videotaping Kelowna residents whose lives have developed in unusual ways, brings together Patrice Duhamel's intuitive visual investigations with the poetic experiments of D. Kimm. Together they explore the fragmented associations of characters caught in strange juxtapositions of the real and the imagined. Their work explores the dialectic between inner and outer realities as local environments are interwoven with personal psychology. Walking becomes a form of contemplation and a movement that paces the geographical spaces of narrative.

Working in an environment where climate, geography and language are unfamiliar, Duhamel and Kimm approach their subjects in an intimate and direct way, allowing them to reveal their stories while remaining open to fictional modes of representation. They are interested in the diversity of human experience as it is formed through generational, ethnic, educational and social difference. While their process is based in a documentary tradition, the results are a mixture of fact and fiction. Their interdisciplinary approach intersects storytelling, contemporary video and spoken-word practices.



*La mariée perpétuelle, video still, 2006*

*My dream...I don't really know if I had one. To live a comfortable life, be happy. Basically about it, be comfortable, make a half decent living. Be comfortable, basically about it.*

*What we all want.*

*Yea, this is true eh?*

*Yea.*

*- Excerpt from video*

Image from video of man quoted above

# June Pak

June Pak grew up in Seoul and is now based in Toronto. Pak has an MFA from the University of Windsor and took an Advanced Course in Visual Arts with Alfredo Jaar at the Fondazione Antonio Ratti in Italy. She teaches at the University of Western Ontario in London and the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto. A multi-media artist in video, audio and digital imaging, Pak has exhibited both nationally in Halifax, Calgary, Windsor and Toronto and internationally in Palestine, Italy, the Netherlands, the U.S. and the U.K.



*Paint Job 1: Mr. Kim's Lab, Vernon, BC*  
Digital Print, 2006

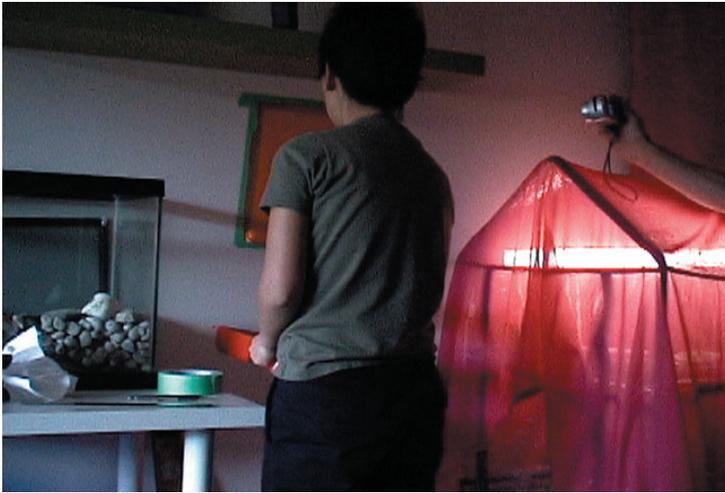


*Paint Job 1: Mr. Kim in his lab, Vernon, BC  
Performance, 2006*

### ***August 9, 2006***

*Mr. Kim (Daniel's dad) welcomed us into his lab. While he was outside gardening, I started on the project. Daniel and I talked about our families and exchanged our experiences growing up Korean-Canadian pursuing the arts. By the time I finished painting the square, Mr. Kim came in and thought I was just about to start on the project. I guess Daniel didn't explain the project in detail to his father, and left Mr. Kim to think that I was actually painting a "painting." Mr. Kim said that he doesn't understand contemporary art, and I said "it's easy ... everyday is art." He was puzzled even more.*

*Daniel and I headed out to my next destination, Katherine's parents' place just a few minutes away from Daniel's. Katherine's parents, Alison and Roger, prepared a lovely BBQ dinner. Roger's Spanish teacher was there and Katherine's sister Jennifer, who just moved back from Vancouver, was there. We had dinner under the canopy by the water.*



*Paint Job 6: Arthur & Shawn's Kitchen, Kelowna, BC  
Performance, 2006*

In *Paint Job*, interior design becomes the foil through which June Pak comments on the circulation of art and its perception by the public. In a seemingly subversive gesture, she emphasizes the commodification of the art object by circumventing the gallery and placing her work directly into the home as a permanent décor element. To emphasize the domestic, her collaborators are given the choice of color, mimicking their role as consumers as well as underlying conceptions of the painted object as decoration to match or accentuate objects in the home. The colors come from the “Algonquin Series” of commercial paint swatches, which Pak posits as an immigrant’s ironic reference to the Group of Seven and its pivotal role in Canadian cultural self-definition. Yet, in the final analysis, Pak’s colored squares are not actually the art objects. The squares are eventually returned to the gallery as digital images, a premeditated strategy to repopulate them back into an art environment. In reducing both the sublime tradition of the Canadian landscape genre and the supposed cultural authority of painting to this minimalist gesture, Pak entices the viewer to look within, rather than without, proposing an understanding of Canadian identity as complex, unstable and individually defined.

**August 13, 2006**

*I met Cherie at the studio building. She agreed to have me at her house. She was in the middle of renovating her second floor. We talked about Feng-shui and spiritual well-being. She cut a few roses for me from her garden when I left her house.*

**August 14, 2006**

*Portia took me to Fern's place in Westbank. On our way, she pointed at the forest fire damaged areas from 2003. Fern & Val shared their travel stories to Korea with us. They mentioned places that I've never heard of, and left me feeling uneasy at myself for not knowing my own country.*

**August 15, 2006**

*Lois brought me to her house on Knox Mountain. When I showed her how I framed the shot with the square in her living room, she was pleased to see the mask on the kitchen cabinet wall in the shot. She promised that she will keep the square forever, and asked me to come and get another square done at her shop.*

- Excerpts from Pak's diary



Paint Job 6: Arthur & Shawn's Kitchen, Kelowna, BC  
Digital Print, 2006



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