

## Shimabuku

15 July-15 Aug  
Wilkinson Gallery, London E2  
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### Review by Dan Smith

This is the first London solo show for Japanese artist Shimabuku, but he has already made an impression in this country. He took part in 'Facts of Life' at the Hayward in 2001, and showed at Birmingham's Ikon in 2002. Perhaps he is best known for his work that documents a tour of Tokyo given by Shimabuku to an octopus from Akashi. The octopus reappears, together with a host of iconography, in a set of screenprints shown upstairs at Wilkinson Gallery. Including a mermaid, a narrow boat and vegetables, these seem to suggest past projects, folding upon themselves references from both Japanese and British cultures – like souvenirs of his travels and practice, a back catalogue that lacks legibility.

Opposite the prints is a photograph of an albino gorilla. As far as I know, there has only been one such animal in captivity: Snowflake, who died of skin cancer in Barcelona Zoo last November. The photograph reminds me of my own encounter with Snowflake a few years ago. To see him was an experience both beautiful and sad, not only because he was kept in a zoo, but because he appeared so alienated in his outward alterity. Snowflake hints at the artist's own status as an outsider. In his work, Shimabuku seems to adopt the position of an alien to whom the world is a fresh and unfamiliar experience. Snowflake's presence here also hints at an emotional core within a body of work that can appear somewhat distracted, erratically diverse and flippant.

In the ground floor space, a Japanese voice appears to be coming from a small cardboard



box that bears all the marks of having been in international transit. Nearby is a circular platform bearing elastic bands; on a wall are instructions to pass your body through an elastic band. Pieces of snapped rubber scattered about are evidence of painful attempts to do so.

In the back space is *Eating with Eyes* (2004). A slide show of 80 images showing plates of food, this piece tilts between the grotesque and the delicious. Through the diversity on offer, this food appears as both a universal necessity and a culturally specific manifestation of locality. Each slide is visible for about six seconds, generating successive moments of hunger and disgust. The harsh flash and close-up technique renders most dishes about as appealing as the pictorial menus in the kebab shop next door to the gallery.

Shimabuku's odyssey continues in the cellar. The first impression of *Swansea Jack Memorial Dog Swimming Competition* (2003) is of a documentary following some idiosyncratic British tradition, but this is in fact an event staged by the artist in response to the myth of Welsh hero Swansea Jack, a black labrador who saved 27 people from a watery grave. The action is orientated around a sequence of Swansea dog-owners throwing a stick or a ball into the sea for retrieval. A Jack Russell takes a while to get the hang of it, earning a round of applause for his failure. Perhaps this sums up the peculiar reality in which, as an outsider, Shimabuku finds himself on these shores.

**Above:** Shimabuku, *Born as a Box*, 2001, box, CD player, CD, variable dimensions