

Painter Yōichirō Yoda is equal parts historian, social scientist, and artist. Since the early 1990s, he has been engaged in a series of works documenting the so-called Great White Way, New York City's Broadway theater district. For more than 20 years, that portion of Midtown Manhattan has been undergoing a slow-but-sure metamorphosis from seedy red-light district to gentrified tourist trap. As a sort of urban renewal renaissance in the 1990s, New York City toughened laws against the many porn theaters that set up shop in the neighborhood in the 1970s and 1980s, shutting them down or forcing them out of business. Eager developers often took over the old theaters, turning them back into pleasure palaces for a newly vibrant Broadway or, in many cases, destroying them completely to erect office buildings, wax museums, and multiplex movie theaters where the grand stages of New York once stood. With camera in hand, Yoda was there to record it all. His work captures the ghosts of Broadway in architectural and painterly forms.

Yoda's paintings are eerie glimpses of the darkened halls of now-defunct theaters such as the Selwyn, the Empire, and the Harem. One painting, *Times Square Theatre Seats*, shows row upon row of red velvet seats in a state of impending decay (Pl. 33.2). It is clear that these dingy seats have not hosted a genteel audience in years, although the possibility of XXX film-viewing is a high probability from the recent past. Yoda would often explore and record these theaters, sometimes befriending guards and construction workers who would allow him to sneak inside days before the theater was set for demolition. Video camera at the ready, Yoda filmed the interiors, stages, and film screening rooms of these theatrical behemoths. His resultant video work, *Last Days of 42nd Street*, is a

compendium of these images shot from 1994 to 2003 (Pl. 33.1). Decidedly noncommercial and grainy, the video is as much brilliant cultural critique as it is useful document of an important part of New York City's social history.

Yoda's deep fascination for Times Square may be rooted in his love of the theatrical. As an artist, he has always been intrigued with the world of fantasy, Hollywood, and the starlets that inhabit that world. In his own life, his tastes run to the extremes of performance: his musical attention leans to heavy metal; his favorite movie is the 1930 film *The Roaring Twenties*, starring James Cagney. Yoda supports his art career by working as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is there surrounded by art, as well as the swarming crowds that populate the museum day in and day out. The fact that his paintings are often devoid of people hints that the artist is just as compelled by the realms of art when they are empty as he is with those same spaces teeming with people eager to look at the most beautiful things the world has to offer.

Yoda is truly surrounded by art around the clock. He lives and works in the same SoHo loft as his parents, Junko and Toshihisa, painters also featured in *Making a Home*. For the Yoda clan, art making is a family affair. Their massive loft is stocked floor to ceiling with canvases from years of shared production. Each of them works in a separate vein, but the smell of paint runs heavy in the air and acts as a common link to the family's production. Only three months old when he moved here, Yōichirō grew up in the thriving art world of New York, surrounded by his parents' paints and artist friends, thus gradually soaking in the stuff that mandated his own future path.

In the end, though, young Yoda has established a voice fully independent from the vocabulary of his parents, steeped as it is in the idioms of the New York School. Yōichirō has established a career as a painter engaged in reportage and social critique. His paintings *Movie Projector (Selwyn Theatre) #1* and *#2* are fully representative of the artist and his oeuvre (Pls. 33.6-7). They show the lone source of magic and light in an otherwise dark environment, just as Yoda brings life to the now destroyed theaters of New York's own realm of musical magic.

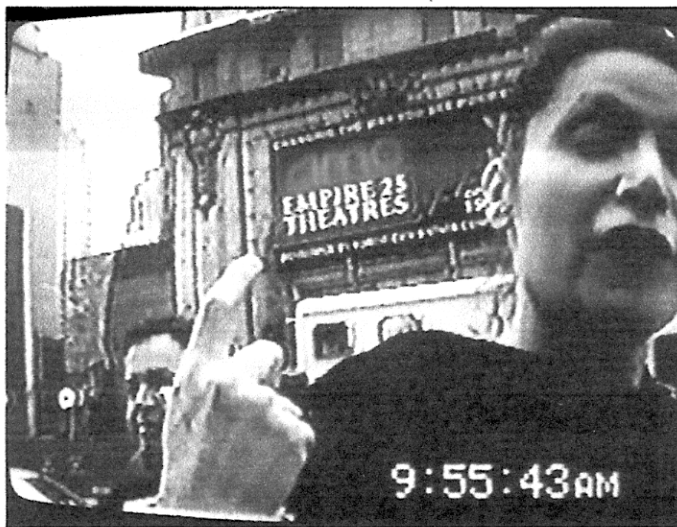


PLATE 33.1

Yōichirō Yoda
Still from *Last Days of 42nd Street*
(Empire Theatre moving)
1994-2003
Video
60 minutes
Collection of the artist

PHOTO: JACQUES DEMELC