By JOHN GOODRICH

There are many great artists today. Tabaimo (b. 1975) combines a number of media and impacts the mix 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 string of the set 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 making events. Through a clever use of “VEN” as the original Japanese word for “public,” “conVENience,” and “woman,” the video’s purpose becomes clear. The space is transformed into a public restroom, creating a sense of familiarity and comfort for the viewer. The artwork features two sets of drawers, one containing various items such as soap, paper towels, and tissues, while the other contains a small mirror and a hair dryer. The viewer is invited to explore these elements, which are then reassembled into a new configuration, creating a sense of interactivity and engagement.

The video installation, the four-minute “haunted house” (2003), features a single, circular projection that sweeps back and forth across the gallery wall, allowing viewers to experience the illusion of flying through an animated environment. The audience is immersed in a world of surrealism and abstraction, where the boundaries between reality and imagination are blurred.

A still from Tabaimo’s “public conVENience” (2006).

James Cohan

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The first sweeping scene shows no people at all but, on the second, small, neat figures appear in 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 towering giants with (disembodied) habits. The golfer’s swing demolishes a building a grandmother impressively devours the tiny person in her bowl. Throughout these events, a jazzy music soundtrack breezes along, turning to jarring notes at strategic points. The spookily rendered “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 drawings, which are only inches wide, are rendered in a delicate, intricate style that captures the light and shadow of the body. The artist’s use of delicate ink and watercolor creates a feeling of motion and movement, as if the figures are dancing across the paper.