

JON SASAKI



*I Would Rather Share A Pumpkin
Than Be Lonely On A Velvet Cushion*

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HALLWALLS

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

SEPT 16 TO OCT 28, 2022



Improvised Travel Adapters, 2018 to ongoing
Type B outlet, coffee spoon, cocktail pick, Type F plug
archival inkjet print, variable dimensions

Like disparate strangers awkwardly encountering each other at a bar and discovering, over the course of a drunken evening, that they are all second cousins by blood, three new works by Jon Sasaki enter into an unexpected and revealing conversation with each other. A light installation, a series of photographs, and a goofball inflatable sculpture do not have any surface or material relationships. At a glance, they do not even appear to belong to the same exhibition. However, they exemplify the variable states of Sasaki's practice and it becomes apparent very quickly that they not only belong in the same space, they are pining for the same thing.

We have not yet defined a genre of “post-pandemic” art but such a deeply-impactful and commonly-shared experience will, unsurprisingly, generate a blossoming of emotions, intuitions, tendencies, and expressions that describe the current moment. In this instance, Sasaki has broadly borrowed from Henry David Thoreau's notion that “I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion” and has challenged that individually-centric idea with his own more inclusive desire: *I Would Rather Share A Pumpkin Than Be Lonely On A Velvet Cushion*. Thoreau—a naturalist, essayist, poet, and transcendentalist—articulated attitudes towards simple living in natural surroundings. Sasaki, by contrast, implicitly recognizes “simple living” is not on the menu and our surroundings have become complex, situational, and increasingly contingent on external forces.

In the face of this predicament, Sasaki's impulse is not toward an isolated meditation, but toward means of connection. His vision of the world does not conform to the technological cocoon that is forever threatening to envelop us all. His is a desire for closeness and for means to express this. Sasaki's chosen methods of expression are appropriately awkward and confused, though also eloquent and heartwarming. These works that do not appear to belong together reveal a need to belong together. Like a shy young man clumsily asking for a date, they are awash in an emotional search to figure out how we can connect, how we can carve enough space on the pumpkin for everyone to find a seat.

Improvised Travel Adapters is a photographic series documenting pragmatic, temporary sculptures derived from experimental gestures sourcing electricity from foreign power outlets. Various found and household conducting objects poke into and out of various outlets in a manner that is blatantly horrifying. Their aspect is so wrong that they can be difficult to look at for very long. None of it is right. There is an implicit understanding that the artist may have endured some measure of literal shock in constructing these theatrical set pieces. They contain a MacGyver style of inventiveness and a bold attitude toward problem-solving while also seeming like the worst possible idea. We understand that an actual dangerously performative moment preceded these images. It's this hidden drama that amplifies their resonant impact. The individual who

concocted these adapters did not merely want a connection; they needed it.

They are humorous images, to be sure, but they perpetually belie their own hilarity through our awareness of this intense desire for connectivity, which imbues them with drama. They know they are a dumb idea, but they will hazard the danger if it succeeds in making the connection. After a prolonged period of isolation for ourselves, how much do we value what we've partially lost? How much do we want to gain back that which seemed to evaporate? Quite a bit, it appears. Many of Sasaki's adapters are improvised in acutely delicate ways—they look like they might barely work, if we're lucky. Their strands sometimes seem tenuous and irredeemably fragile, just gossamer threads of hope barely hanging on. Sometimes, his use of conductive objects lends a bejeweled quality to the improvisations as if to underscore the incalculable value of the connection pursued.

Ultimately, their enormous act of daring sets them apart from their own frightening and abject qualities. They profoundly express the depths of this particular desire as the images repeat this singular sentiment—albeit each in singular and non-repeated configurations—and the emotion builds across the images. Exhibited in three different sizes, they reverberate their pining desires with overlapping intensities that build and accrue until the proposition loses its absurd premise and articulates our inner

longings. Unframed and adhered directly to the wall, they share some commonalities with wheat-pasted propaganda images and this immediacy of presentation serves to underscore their urgency.

In a wildly different formal and material iteration, Sasaki has adjacently installed a light work entitled *A Constellation For Every Person On Earth*, which refers back over a hundred years to the 1901 Pan American Exposition held in Buffalo, at which President William McKinley was shot. Electricity was central to the Pan Am Expo, which thrillingly utilized 20,000 8-watt bulbs strewn across the grounds to demonstrate the wonder and magic of the still fairly recent invention of the lightbulb in 1879. In Sasaki's homage to that moment, thirty-three lightbulbs are strewn across a portion of the gallery. The work is computer-controlled to cycle through every possible combination of thirty-three bulbs—8,589,934,592 variants roughly corresponds to the population of the earth a decade from now so its earnest sentiment to create a singular constellation for everyone is established for the present and the near future.

Its astonishing simplicity of material presentation is imbued—through its computational aspect—with a complex web of possible associations. It is a reflection of time on an individual and geological scale. It articulates our individual uniqueness while simultaneously expressing our individual insignificance in the face of our collective worth.

It offers both the vastness of the cosmos and the casual and comfortable familiarity of patio lights. They are stars and, then, so are we. They offer us dots to connect while suggesting we are already connected. The close relationships for which we pine already exist, shimmering and persistent, and only require our recognition for their realization. The work's physical embodiment is as spare as possible, its visual effects perhaps muted when the pattern uses only a few lights, but its thematic punch is profound, its gesture expansive and inclusive. Unlike the adapters, which pursue connection, the *Constellation* embodies connection.

These two works sharply identify the smart conceptualism central to Sasaki's practice. They are simple and direct but plunge deeply into their themes in cogent and cohesive ways. But Sasaki's art practice is not merely that of a cool-headed conceptualist. He has frequently inserted humor and pathos into his work and a third work that gives the exhibition its title— *I Would Rather Share A Pumpkin Than Be Lonely On A Velvet Cushion*—lays his heart blatantly on his sleeve—or his pumpkin—as if there were any doubt. Three inflatable tube people, apparently on a break from mawkishly drawing attention to a car dealership or a bodega, rest atop a shared pumpkin, swaying in the breeze. Sasaki's use of the most common and most attention-getting commercial device as a central point in his exhibition focuses our thoughts on the musings brought about by his other works. Apparently,

there *is* room on the pumpkin for everyone. And those who choose to share their space rather than isolate in a cocoon appear to benefit greatly from the situation. So much so that they occasionally reverberate with a quasi-orgasmic vibration.

At the same time, this connectivity within a shared space is not without challenges. Sasaki's tube trio struggle sometimes to remain upright as they are tormented by external forces. Meanwhile, each figure arrives from the factory with big eyes and a stock smile that, given the predicament, quickly begins to read as a frozen, nervous aspect. It is the unsettled state of tentative reassurance, the visage of a figure beset by the Stockholm Syndrome, trying to convince themselves that everything is just fine.

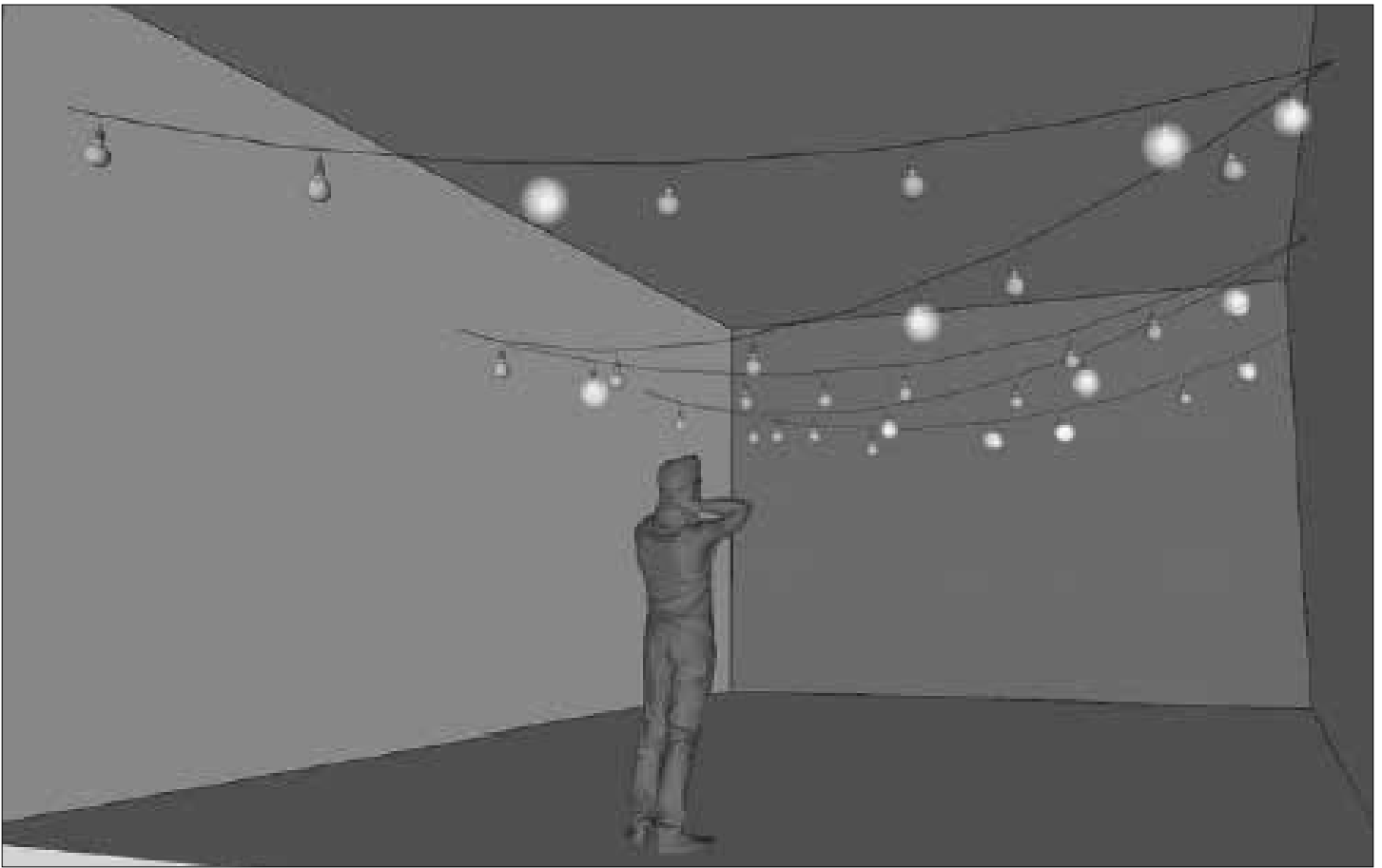
We want it to be just fine, but uncertainty abounds. Jon Sasaki has tapped into specific and primal emotions while, true to his conceptual practice, illustrating the shades of pathos that wash over everything and the disquieting friction found at the edges of desire. Our impulses toward connection and reaffirmation are strong and achievable but not easily so. We are forever changed by the moment and are forced to proceed with a confidence tempered by wariness.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator



I Would Rather Share A Pumpkin Than Be Lonely On A Velvet Cushion, 2022
airblown inflatable, fans, Arduino-controlled DMX relay pack, DC motor, power supply, cords
dimensions variable





A Constellation For Every Person On Earth, 2022

cycling through every possible combination for thirty-three bulbs (8,589,934,592), this figure roughly corresponds to the number of people on earth today and even more closely matches population projections for a decade from now
LED light string, Arduino controller, power supply
dimensions variable





Improvised Travel Adapters, 2018 to ongoing
Type F power bar, metal comb, mechanical pencil, Type N plug
archival inkjet print, variable dimensions



Improvised Travel Adapters, 2018 to ongoing
Type G outlet, luggage tags, Type A plug
archival inkjet print, variable dimensions

Jon Sasaki is a Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist who explores many concurrent streams of inquiry that often intertwine in unexpected ways. Frequently charting territory between logic and absurdity, his practice brings performance, video, object and installation into a framework where problem-solving, humour, peril and pathos are recurring features. His work has been exhibited in solo exhibitions at the Richmond Art Gallery; The Rooms (St. John's Nfld); the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, (Lethbridge, AB); and the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto). Sasaki has participated in recent group exhibitions at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, (Seoul, South Korea); The Bentway, (Toronto); The Canadian Embassy in Japan (Tokyo); and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto, ON).

He has presented durational performance projects at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, the LIVE Performance Art Biennale (Vancouver BC); and commissions for Toronto's *Nuit Blanche*, The Power Plant (Toronto) and The Toronto Dance Theatre. Often taking the form of an absurd challenge, these performances act as prompts for ad hoc problem solving, in effect becoming temporary laboratories that strive to find new and useful tools to overcome obstacles.

Numerous one-night, event-based participatory projects have staged inefficiencies or impossible tasks to invite random, unpredictable outcomes, often skewing towards the tragicomic. They have been presented at the Gardiner Museum (Toronto); Massive Party (The Art Gallery of Ontario); and Operanation (Canadian Opera Company, Toronto.) Sasaki's involvement in participatory events began with his membership to the Toronto/Vancouver based art collective Instant Coffee, between 2002 and 2007.

Jon has participated in Canadian and international residencies, including the 2015 Canadian Glenfiddich Artists in Residence Prize (Dufftown, Scotland); Cataract Gorge AIR (Launceston, Tasmania, AU); Struts&Faucet (Sackville NB); three stints in Japan, and The Canadian Residency (Detroit MI.)

Beginning in 2014 with a public commission for Sheridan College, Sasaki has been working in the realm of public art. He has completed permanent works for the City of Mississauga, Ontario; the City of Barrie, Ontario; and the Toronto Transit Commission. He is currently artist-lead on a Toronto waterfront memorial to Terry Fox, in collaboration with landscape architecture firm DTAH.

Sasaki holds a BFA from Mount Allison University (Sackville, NB,) he lives and works in Toronto where he is represented by Clint Roenisch Gallery.

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I Would Rather Share A Pumpkin Than Be Lonely On A Velvet Cushion

September 16 to October 28, 2022



M&T Bank



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