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[Reviews](#)
[Spotlights](#)
[Interviews](#)
[Archive](#)
[E-Gallery](#)
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[Calendar](#)

Jonathan Rattner and Jill Baker

Posted on September 28th, by Matthew Blanshei in [Spotlights](#), [Visual Arts - Spotlights](#). [No Comments](#)



On September 9, 1942, a seaplane was catapulted from a Japanese submarine some twenty-five miles off the coast of southwest Oregon. Nobou Fujita piloted the tiny craft toward the Siskiyou National Forest and dropped two 170-pound incendiary bombs near Mt. Emily. The aim of the mission, which Fujita himself proposed to the high command, was to start a massive forest fire powerful enough to “burn an entire town.” Owing to damp conditions, however, the bomb only destroyed a single tree.

“This is not,” Jonathan Rattner and Jill Baker tell us, “a well-known story.” This suggestive understatement is perfectly in keeping with the tone of the experimental documentary and mixed-media installation as a whole. Meticulously constructed and refreshingly restrained, the film exposes viewers to the obstacles that stand in the way of retrieving a largely forgotten past while also asking us to take a closer look at the desire to perform such a rescue operation in the first place.

The formidable difficulties that one often encounters when attempting to impose a coherent narrative structure onto historical events are effectively represented in the film’s opening moments.

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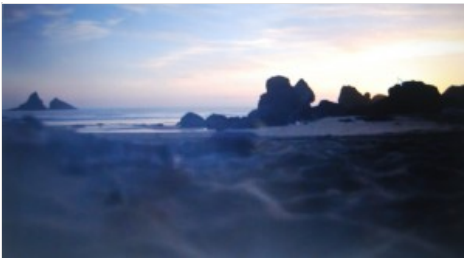
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A black screen, a wind-swept ocean surface (photographs taken from a low-flying plane?), and flickering, horizontal lines of a faintly greenish-white hue create a montage that is accompanied by the roar of the sea and the low, monotonic blare of a foghorn. The artificial or constructed quality of these images is reinforced by the intermittent sound of an off-camera machine that, with an air of frustration or impatience, seems incapable of “getting a picture.”

In fact, the horizontal lines that evoke a television screen with poor reception or fluttering venetian blinds (in either case, our desire to see is awakened and thwarted) turn out to be reeling images recorded on microfilm. Whatever initial impression the abstract lines made on us is belatedly “corrected,” a process that Baker and Rattner seem to have gone through again and again as they conducted research for their documentary.

The delayed revelation of the microfiche reader also gives us an intimation of how much history Baker and Rattner had to overlook in order to track down buried archival reports about the 1942 bombing. Moreover, the scant source material (e.g., a contemporary local newspaper account) may strike us as an inadequate, two-dimensional snapshot that actually makes Fujita’s flight seem more distant, especially when it is juxtaposed with interviews of Brookings Oregon residents who recall actually hearing his plane over sixty years ago. “It sounded like a lawn mower that wasn’t working properly,” one of the witnesses says contemplatively, as though hitting upon the simile on the spot. But whatever that memory allows her to hear brings us no closer to the event itself. The steady, mechanized hum on the soundtrack (which “fails” to imitate the malfunctioning mower) reminds us of this disjunction, as does a visit to the actual bombsite.

Shot from the first-person point of view with a hand-held camera, the approach to the bombsite conveys the well-meaning curiosity of a tourist, who then takes in the sign marking the Bombsite Trail with a casual glance. Of greater immediate interest are the precise movements of a slug (a metaphor for the “subjective” experience of time?) and Caspar David Friedrich-like views of a rocky coast.

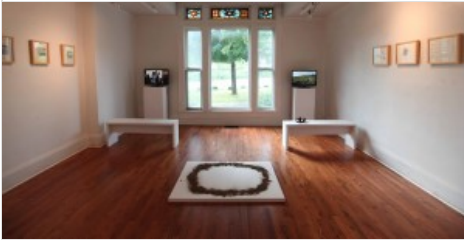


The desire to fashion a narrative out of the 1942 bombing originated among the residents of Brookings, located about fifteen miles east of Mt. Emily. A local dramatist, Kathleen Tomko, went so far as to write a play—“The Forgotten Tree”—based on the event. Tomko sees Fujita as an impressionable, dutiful man who subsequently sought “forgiveness” for the attack on “nature.” The inclusion of Tomko’s portrayal of Fujita in the documentary at times leaves us uncertain as to whether we are reading passages from Fujita’s actual account of the event (which was evidently transcribed and translated) or excerpts from Tomko’s play. Baker and Rattner accentuate this ambiguity by presenting Fujita’s statements as silent film-like intertitles, produced by a “period” typewriter.

But regardless of whether the filmmakers are presenting Fujita’s recollections or Tomko’s fictionalizations, we are no closer to answering such questions as: why didn’t the Japanese try to bomb the forest again? Just how did the Brookings Oregon Jaycees track down Fujita (he returned to Brookings in 1962 to participate in a local annual festival)? Or did Fujita decide to reach out to Brookings in a spirit of what Tomko describes as “forgiveness”?

Ultimately, Baker and Rattner have set the stage for us to ask why this episode has evidently become so important to members of the small Brookings community, a once thriving lumber town. The memorialization of the event is recreated in the mixed-media installation, which also features drawings (souvenir-like sketches of Fujita’s plane and the samurai sword he gave to the city of Brookings as a gift) and a symbolic ring of dirt on a plank of white wood (perhaps representing the crater at the bombsite). And, turning the exhibit in part into a site-specific work, Baker and Rattner have even incorporated into the narrative a lone tree (standing in for the one torched by the bombs),

visible through the window.



The sense of closure that the Brookings community and Fujita may have sought seems, when transposed into this memorial to a memorial, like an impossible wish. And all the more so when we realize that the documentary appears on two television screens. The video recordings are not synchronized, which means that, while watching and listening (through headphones) to one, a fleeting image may enter our peripheral vision, reminding us of something we have already seen. Except that now, even if only for an instant, it appears differently, causing the relationship between what we see and what we think we know to become unstable. Meanwhile the “documentary” images on the screen continue to follow a quiet rhythm of their own. We can no more pause the film than we can arrest the present, whose tentative “meaning,” should it emerge at all, will only arrive later, thanks to the restorative and distorted work of memory.

For more on The Untitled Bombsite Project, visit <http://untitledbproject.wordpress.com/>

(The Birdhouse Gallery. 800 North 4th Avenue. Through September 29)



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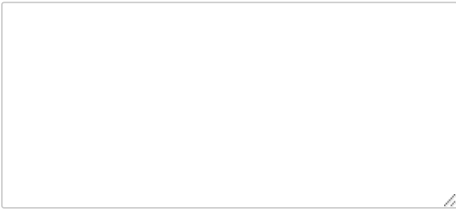
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