On the funny side of the universe

BY JOHN L. TRAN
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Harrison’s show “Some Things Are Hard to Explain” is proving to be a big hit at the NTT Intercommunication Center. The artists’ wry, tongue-in-cheek videos, drawings and animations are intentionally gormless and genuinely thought-provoking at the same time.

One of the first videos that confronts visitors when entering the exhibition is of the two Brits tied together, as one would be for a three-legged race, dodging tennis balls that are being pelted at them at close range. Our point of view is that of the tennis ball machine and, as the two artists act out the “Jackass”-like prank in great earnestness, the audience is given a seemingly omniscient view from which to observe their antics. This is, of course, deeply, if somewhat cruelly, satisfying, and reverses the power-
relationship between artist and viewer, in that we appear to know what’s going on better than the creators of the work, who are desperately hopping about and occasionally don’t manage to get out of the way in time.

The exhibition as a whole is full of visual tricks and experiments that might have been devised by a genius toddler who has just read Isaac Newton’s “Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy” and is testing out the laws of motion and gravity using materials at hand without being greatly concerned about clearing up the ensuing mess. When Wood and Harrison perform in videos they use their bodies as hapless objects, purposefully poker-faced as they fall, push each other and bounce around in setups that exploit the classic comedy pairing of short and tubby with tall and thin.

There is, however, comic timing and wit, whether they actually appear in the work or not, and the particular delight and satisfaction that their art practice evokes are twofold: Either we know what’s going to happen before it does, such as with a black textured rubber mat that gradually becomes white as milk is poured into it, or we are surprised by the results of simple actions (to describe a work would be to spoil it, so I can’t give any examples). It’s a bit Benny Hill meets Albert Camus, along with a sprinkling of the Kyoto School philosopher Kitaro Nishida, whose work wrestled with the relationship between the self-aware subject and the world of objects.

Using a format reminiscent of YouTube, their earlier videos are low-tech snippets and compilations, and go against the orthodoxy that contemporary art video must be labored, boring and slow. It’s one of the few exhibitions where every visitor seems to be enthralled enough to watch every video
from beginning to end.

This is not, however, just a matter of accessibility. Simple processes are elevated to the level of insight about how the universe works. What distinguishes the exhibition from a science-museum exhibit for kids, is the subtext that being socialized into the drudgery of everyday modern life can deaden our sense of wonder at the order of the cosmos, and distract us from acknowledging the absurdity of human activity in the greater scheme of things. By using only cheap everyday objects, their work sometimes resembles the fiddlings of bored office workers performing minor creative acts of rebellion by making stick men with paper clips, or seeing how far they can flick rubber bands.

For some viewers, Wood and Harrison’s later pieces, which are technically more complex and longer, may not have the immediate appeal of their earlier obviously funny videos. It could be that with their growing success they are taking themselves and their art a little more seriously, but it is also, no doubt, a result of them being intent on trying something new. What will they think of next?