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Jon Kessler's metaphor-machines process the ironies of the urban Orient he's been exploring lately, sending out signals that all is not what it seems. For some inscrutable reason, in Tokyo, Hong Kong, and other outposts which appear fully Westernized, the familiar becomes foreign, and the foreign, familiar.

At the entrance to this exhibition we are greeted by an automatic video show. A robotic mechanical system pulls down a screen, inserts a videodisc, and pushes the buttons on the remote control that set the picture on the screen in motion. A home video is projected of a harried worker at a 'cookie-machine' churning out traditional bean-filled pastries on the street. The WYSIWYG world of the video scene and the system which plays it prepares us for the spectacles of faux high-tech inside the gallery. Despite their undeniably saccharine allure, the sourest of truths are hardwired into the works. Unlike in Oz, most of Kessler's machines display their mechanical magic on the outside, casting shadows of earthly reality onto otherwise pristine scenes. The construct of natural beauty is dissected in [Ikebana #2](#) (all works 1994), which offers a stunningly photographed Ikebana flower arrangement which splits apart before our eyes into its component yellow, pink and blue transparencies, producing an exotic, candy-colored pleasure. In [Autumn Box](#), he sets common plastic decorations celebrating autumn (orange orbs and tinsel) against a background of photo-wallpaper whose rich, harvesty images of trees have had their hues pumped up, warmly enriched. Inside an airless glass diorama, the ornament falls, then bobs happily upward to its own cyclical rhythm. The Japanese belief that the human touch is needed to improve upon nature (centuries of bonsai and Zen gardens) is extended by Kessler with 20th century irony.

Like natural beauty, reality is fleeting. Or maybe it has fled, or been replaced by more durable materials - the plastic, for instance, used in [Still Life \(with Pork Chop\)](#) for the slab of meat which is periodically revealed and then hidden in a slick display unit, an upscale version of the ubiquitous vending machine or 'conveyor-belt sushi' restaurant. Decorations, information, images from pop culture 'flowers and city maps are variously overlaid, backlit and distorted. In [Matrix](#), a revolving billboard spins with sets of overlapping representations mixing high and low, photo and illustration, fact and fiction, never resting long enough for our eyes to separate the scenes. The energy of this amalgamation contributes to the enigma, hiding the by hype. Kessler taps a young, urban pulse on fast-forward. Images and texts are often hybridised in striking but meaningless ways, all to feed the hunger for new images, new goods, to give a powerthrust to the more important cycle of consumption. There is a perverse, unabashed beauty in the illogic, in the artifice, in the spectacle that Kessler has witnessed and deftly reconstituted

with awe, understanding, and a dash of cynicism. These exotic salvage-souvenirs are grounded by a little local realism- a New York hot-dog stand traverses the room like a contentious cloud.

As Paul Theroux, Pico Iyer, and now Jon Kessler have revealed, we can't but be tainted travelers now. Innocent Asia is gone, and yet who can blame us for capitulating to the call of the wild pulsing tropical rhythms, the quiet inner calm of Zen Buddhism, or simply the vision of a Pacific island sunset inching its way from blue to orange to purple. But long before the non-stop Jumbo Jet, 'Asia' has been a construct of the Western imagination, and Kessler's quirky but seductive mechanical constructions toy with this tradition. Kessler knows - and shows - that beyond the air-conditioned duty-free malls, the neon lights shine on an array of glorious contradictions.