



Josh Azzarella and the 20th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square

By Abraham Ritchie, the Chicago City Editor
June 4, 2009

Today, June 4th, 2009, marks the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square student protests that were brutally crushed by the Chinese military leaving hundreds or thousands dead. We will never really know exactly how many people lost their lives during the violence.

Iconic of the protests is the video of the lone person, now commonly called "the unknown rebel" facing down a tank in the tank, refusing to move and blocking the machine's path.

It is this video and our historical distance that Josh Azzarella examines in his 2006 video work *Untitled #27 (Unknown Rebel)*. You can watch the Azzarella's video by finding it on his website. This piece and others were on display during the artist's solo exhibition at Kavi Gupta Gallery in 2008. You can read my thoughts on that exhibition and the video *Untitled #27 (Unknown Rebel)*, in the excerpt below:

Also on display with the images are several videos that follow in the same line of thought. Azzarella's video *Untitled #27 (Unknown Rebel)* uses for its source material the 1989 footage of the lone protester in China's Tiananmen Square facing down and blocking the column of tanks sent to break up the pro-democracy protests that were happening there. However, in Azzarella's version of the event, the lone man is simply alone. The tanks have been effaced and he slides side-to-side opposing nothing. After a few seconds he is joined as a figure runs out to meet him, later another glides out on a bicycle. The three figures seem to have a conversation and then they all go off-screen together. Ironically, Azzarella's version of history could be the official vision embraced by the Communist government of China since they denied the event even happened for years and still forbid and censor reference to it. The Orwellian overtones are even more ominous here as the event is fundamentally changed in the way it plays out, like it was freshly prepared by China's own Ministry of Truth.