

The Resonance of Photography and the Reverberation of Painting: Kunié Sugiura in the 1970s

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Kunié Sugiura is largely known for her photograms produced from 1980 onwards. However, her works from the 1960s to 1970s, in which she continued to work across the borders of photography and painting while experimenting with photographic techniques, are extremely striking (1). These works deserve a proper evaluation, both in terms of their statements with respect to the fundamental possibilities of visual expression and their pioneering approach to concept and technique.

Even now, I can vividly remember the time I first saw Sugiura's "photo-painting" series in the late 1990s. Tensions arose from the strained relationship between the photographic and painterly vision. It was as if the visual sense of time evoked both the past and the future at once. This mysterious work, which combines monochrome painting with photographic images, seemed surprisingly fresh, even as it brought me back to the 1970s. Let us take a closer look at her works again.

From a Highway and *The Station* are similar in form, but they differ in terms of the way that Sugiura's photographs apprehend space. In the former, the gaze moves horizontally across the picture plane and skids off the panel's physical border. In the latter, though, the gaze is directed towards the depth of the photographic image; here, the border of the panel emphasizes the disconnection of the photograph from the painting. It is as if these movements of the gaze—i.e. horizontally across the picture plane, towards its depth—were to suggest the grammar of cinema.

The photographs and paintings that make up *Yellow Floor* are aligned horizontally, while those that make up *Asphalt* are aligned vertically. However, the photographs in these works each apprehend space from a wide perspective

that is at an oblique angle to the ground. In both works, as we look toward the top of the work, our gaze is guided towards the depth of the photographic image. Still, the colored surface pulls our gaze back towards the work's surface. Because the nuance of the colored surface creates a fluctuation of its space, it also stimulates the viewer to grasp the picture plane in a comprehensive way.

In both *Confucius Plaza* and *Holiday Light*, the light that floats in darkness is impressive, but the form and color of these works are different. The former work shows an affinity for color through a shape that is easy to recognize, while the latter, whose colors contrast with one another, has an extremely oblong shape.

The forms of the two images that are combined to form *View from Dakota* are quite different. Both *Connecticut* and *Sidewalk Palms* use wooden frames, and the relationship between their physical forms and the way that they apprehend space visually is quite complex. In all three works, the method of "photo-painting" creates the feeling that there exist further possibilities here in terms of proportion, scale and depth.

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Photography generally involves "shooting with the camera" and "fixing the image on photographic paper." The photogram, which has been referred to as "camera-less photography," is a technique that expands the possibilities of the medium of photographic paper. Sugiura, however, uses positive images and color toning to strengthen the qualities of painting in her work. Sugiura also uses a method of applying photosensitive emulsion to a canvas and then fixing an image on it. This is an attempt to free the photographic image from the constraints of photographic

paper. In Sugiura's "photo-painting," painterly qualities are introduced at two levels—first when the image is fixed on the canvas, and then when it is arranged with the painting. In this way, Sugiura intervenes in photograph-generating processes in order to open up their possibilities; she gives "photo-painting" and the photogram the experience of an encounter with painting.

When I focus on these qualities, I am reminded of Gerhard Richter, who, with his consistent visual awareness, pursues a diverse range of techniques. I cannot afford to explain in more detail, but it is possible to understand Sugiura's "photo-painting" as another research method that Richter has explored through his series "Photo Paintings," "Abstracts" and "Grey Painting." It would also be fruitful to compare Richter's many-layered "Overpainted Photographs" method with Sugiura's technique of photo collage, which is based on juxtaposition. At the risk of being too simplistic, it may be possible to say that Richter creates a multi-layered visual experience, whereas Sugiura creates sequential visual experiences using the passage of time and the movement of the gaze. If Richter deals with questions of light and photographic vision through a renewal of painting, Sugiura deals with questions of shadow and painterly vision through a renewal of photography.

The means of expression available today are multifarious, so it is now hard to imagine that when Sugiura first visited the United States in 1963, "photography as art" still occupied a minor position (2). However, the photographic image greatly contributed to the rapid development of Pop Art at that time. It has often been pointed out that Pop Art and Minimal Art are like two sides of the same coin. This claim ought to be made on the basis

of the way that these movements transformed visual culture in general, rather than on certain aesthetic features shared in common, such as mechanical repetition. Pop Art was established through the vital and forceful interpenetration of painting and photography, while the vital and forceful interpenetration of painting and sculpture established a genealogy of modernism from Abstract Expressionism through to Color Field Painting and Minimal Art (3).

If that is the case, Sugiura's "photo-painting" reveals both sides of this period: she juxtaposes the sensibilities of Pop Art and Minimal Art, and thus clearly reveals the qualities of this era. However, we cannot afford to forget that her formal and fundamental radicalness is supported by her thoroughly personal gaze, a tranquil introspection that sometimes radiates a sense of emptiness. The photographic image may be the product of optical and chemical image-generating tools, but it is also a careful image created by extremely personal motives.

Notes

(1) Leslie Tonkonow and Kunié Sugiura, "A Conversation with Kunié Sugiura," *Kunié Sugiura: Photographic Works from the 1970s and Now*, Leslie Tonkonow Artworks+Projects, New York, 2012

(2) Charles Stainback, "Perfect Timing," *Kunié Sugiura: Time Emit*, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, 2008, pp.9-11

(3) It is important to note that the interpenetration of painting and sculpture-incompatible with the medium's purity and reduction as advocated by formalist critique-progressed during the years following Modernism. For specific information, see: Gen Umezu, "The Hard Edge of Modernism" *ABST No.6*, 2011, pp.13-43