

artasiapacific |

Contemporary Visual Culture

RANA BEGUM, KUNIÉ SUGIURA, ZHOU TAO
HONG KONG HANDOVER: 20 YEARS LATER, FIRENZE LAI

ISSUE 104 JUL/AUG 2017

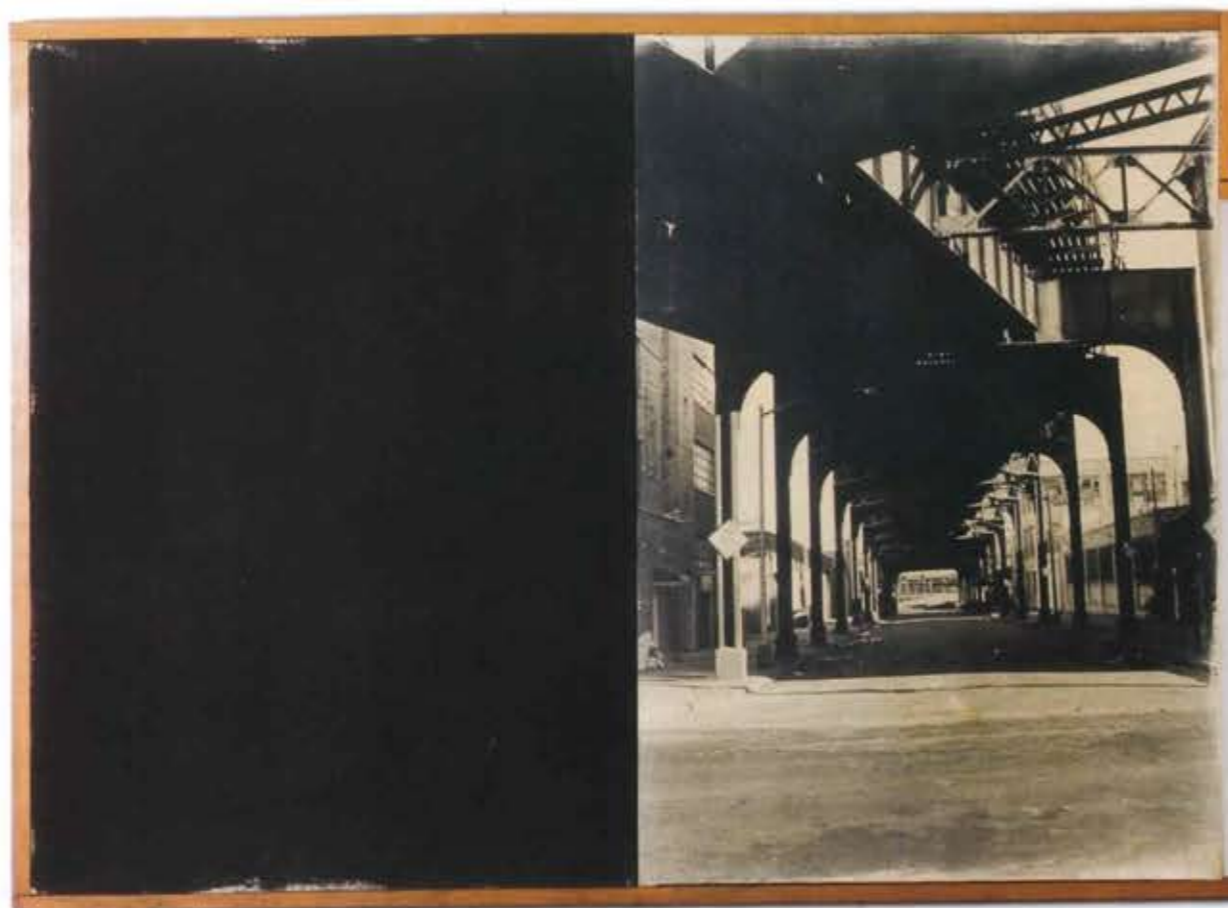


0 3 > AU \$21 CA \$15
EU €14 GB £12
HK \$116 JP ¥1670
KR ₩24000 NZ \$22
SG \$21 US \$15



7 25274 56736 2

KUNIÉ



BECOMING IMAGE



By HG Masters

SUGIURA



In Kunié Sugiura's *Confucius Plaza* (1977), a photographic image of a high-rise building silhouetted against the night sky is conjoined with a messily painted, dark-blue canvas. Two eminent modes of modern art-making—photography and abstract painting—are suspended in a strange equilibrium, each with their unique histories of capturing 20th-century life in New York. The associations reel off: we see Manhattan's new buildings depicted in iconic photographs by Alfred Stieglitz and Berenice Abbott; and the midcentury abstract paintings by the European émigrés and their American acolytes that came to embody the city's postwar cosmopolitanism. While photography and painting have been locked in an unstated rivalry for much of modern art history, here the two media appear in transition, becoming more alike one another, despite, or even because of, their raw materiality. There's a dark, inky quality to the photograph and the brushy field of blue, as if both had come from a single ink-painter's brush.

The building captured in *Confucius Plaza* is a 44-story brick high-rise near the Manhattan Bridge, completed in 1976 as public housing for New York's Chinese community. Sugiura's studio is just around the corner, on a small street in Chinatown that has survived the area's current gentrification. Sugiura apologized, unnecessarily, for the three-floor climb even before I'd made it to the top of the stairs, when I went to meet her in early March. My timing was fortuitous. She was expecting a visit from a Tokyo museum curator the following week, and her work was laid out in her studio.

As she gave me a tour, I asked about works of hers I had seen with increasing frequency in the last three years. My first question was where this idea to make photographs on canvas and then put them beside another canvas had come from. She explained: "When I was in school, I always thought photography was as important as painting or sculpture. But in those days, if I said I took photographs, most artists would say, 'You are not a real artist.' Warhol and Rauschenberg were coming up then, and they were making silkscreens on canvas. So I thought if I could make photographs on canvas, people would take me more seriously."

Sugiura was correct; people did take her more seriously. In January 1972, less than five years after she had graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), Sugiura's canvas work was included in the Whitney Museum's Annual Exhibition by curator Marcia Tucker. (At that time, the Whitney spotlighted painting and

sculpture in alternate years; in the catalog for the show, the artist was listed by her single-name moniker, Kunié, between Frances Kuehn and Jacob Lawrence.) Just ten years earlier, she had been studying physics at a college in Tokyo, dissatisfied with the limited potential for women in Japan. This compelled her to apply to SAIC, where she was accepted to study photography with Kenneth Josephson and Frank Barsotti, both students of László Moholy-Nagy, who in 1937 established the New Bauhaus, later renamed the Institute of Design, at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Sugiura's early "Cko" series (1966–67), pronounced "koh" and derived from the Japanese word for "isolation" or "alienation," are unique chromogenic prints, featuring multiple human figures printed repeatedly across surfaces drenched in psychedelic fields of colors and patterns. They reflect the influence of the existentialist writers that she had been reading at the time, such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka and Simone de Beauvoir. While her professors updated students on what Warhol and Rauschenberg were doing in New York, and what John Baldessari was doing in Los Angeles, Sugiura was the only undergraduate in her class at SAIC who majored in photography. In 1967, as she explained to me, "Photography was still considered minor."

Today, it might seem as if photography is no longer a "minor" art form, because of the contributions of artists such as Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Thomas Demand, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Walid Raad and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf photographers, such as Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth. Yet most major museums, including conservative New York institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, still arrange painting and sculpture together in their master narratives of 19th and 20th century Euro-American art, and relegate "fragile" photography to smaller, dimly lit rooms, where it is accorded its own sub-history and shares space with works on paper or editioned prints. While not bestowed major status in the history of art, the minor language of photography—and its use in advertising, journalism and science—has nevertheless provided artists working in the medium the ability to connect the conventions of high art (such as abstraction or conceptualism) with real events and physical places.

Art historical exhibitions in the last two decades have established the importance of photography in postwar modernism and postmodernism. For example, shows such as "Global Conceptualism:



(Previous spread)
DEADEND STREET, 1978, photo emulsion and acrylic on canvas and wood, 94 x 290 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

(Opposite page)
CONFUCIUS PLAZA, 1977, photo emulsion, acrylic on canvas, 71 x 101 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

(This page, top left)
#119, 1967, from the series "Cko," 1966–7, unique C-print, 37 x 30 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

(This page, bottom right)
CENTRAL PARK 3, 1970, photo emulsion, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 213 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

Points of Origin 1950s–1980s" (1999, Queens Museum); "The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982" (2003–04, Walker Art Center); and "Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964–1977" (2011–12, Art Institute of Chicago) have illustrated how, in the 1960s, photography became an experimental artistic medium in its own right, while also being used by artists to capture conceptual or performative works. Recently, Sugiura was included in an exhibition that looked at contemporaneous developments in Japan, "For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968–1979," organized by curator Yasufumi Nakamori at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH) and which toured to Japan Society and Grey Art Gallery in New York in 2015. Yet she remained a peripheral figure even in that context, having not participated in any of the historical exhibitions and events in Japan during the period, such as the 1970 Tokyo Biennale: "Fifteen Photographers Today," at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, in 1974; or even "New Japanese Photography" at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, the same year. In "For a New World to Come," Sugiura was grouped thematically in a section of artistic misfits called "Projection, Photocopy and Circulation," along with Nobuo Yamanaka (1948–1982), who used pinhole cameras and created camera-obscura installations, and Masao Mochizuki, who documented the television coverage of the British queen's visit to Tokyo in 1975. Interestingly, one of two works by Sugiura in "For a New World to Come," is the same work that Marcia Tucker chose for the 1972 Whitney Annual, an exhibition of "Contemporary American Painting": *Central Park 3* (1970), a black-and-white photo-emulsion print on a five-by-seven-foot canvas, depicting in extreme close-up a rock's granular surface.

Central Park 3 represents the works Sugiura made between 1968 and 1971 after she moved to New York from Chicago, when she primarily took black-and-white close-up photographs of natural materials: a wall covered in ivy, a tree's bark in Central Park, the rocks of the Coney Island jetty, flowers such as roses, azaleas and mums, and a couple who engaged in sex. She worked in her apartment's large bedroom, where, for up to two hours at a time, she would sit in the dark listening to music while projecting her images onto large canvases—some up to eight feet in width—covered with a light-sensitive photo-emulsion, in a manner similar to how a painter primes a canvas to receive oil paint. Because the surface was not stark white like photo paper, the contrast in the images wasn't as strong, and Sugiura would darken the images



using pencil or spots of acrylic paint. Though the canvases were large, they evoked not the broad landscapes of American abstract painting but depicted surfaces in intense granularity, enlarged to the point of abstraction. In *Central Park 3*, for instance, the rock's surface texture, captured in the photographic image and printed onto transparent photo-emulsion, seems to merge with the canvas's weave—a texture so immediately evocative of the material conditions of painting.

By comparison, the works of Sugiura's peers in the Whitney show ranged from painterly abstractions by Kenneth Noland, Mary Heilmann and Jack Whitten, to photorealistic works such as Audrey Flack's *Macarena of Miracles* (1971) and Chuck Close's portrait *Nat* (1971), as well as Sylvia Plimack Mangold's intricate painting of wood parquet floors. While painting had moved toward extremes—geometric abstraction, hyperrealism and photorealism—Sugiura's massively enlarged, abstract image on canvas was something more singular, a kind of photograph-becoming-a-painting that never arrived at either medium-specific destination.

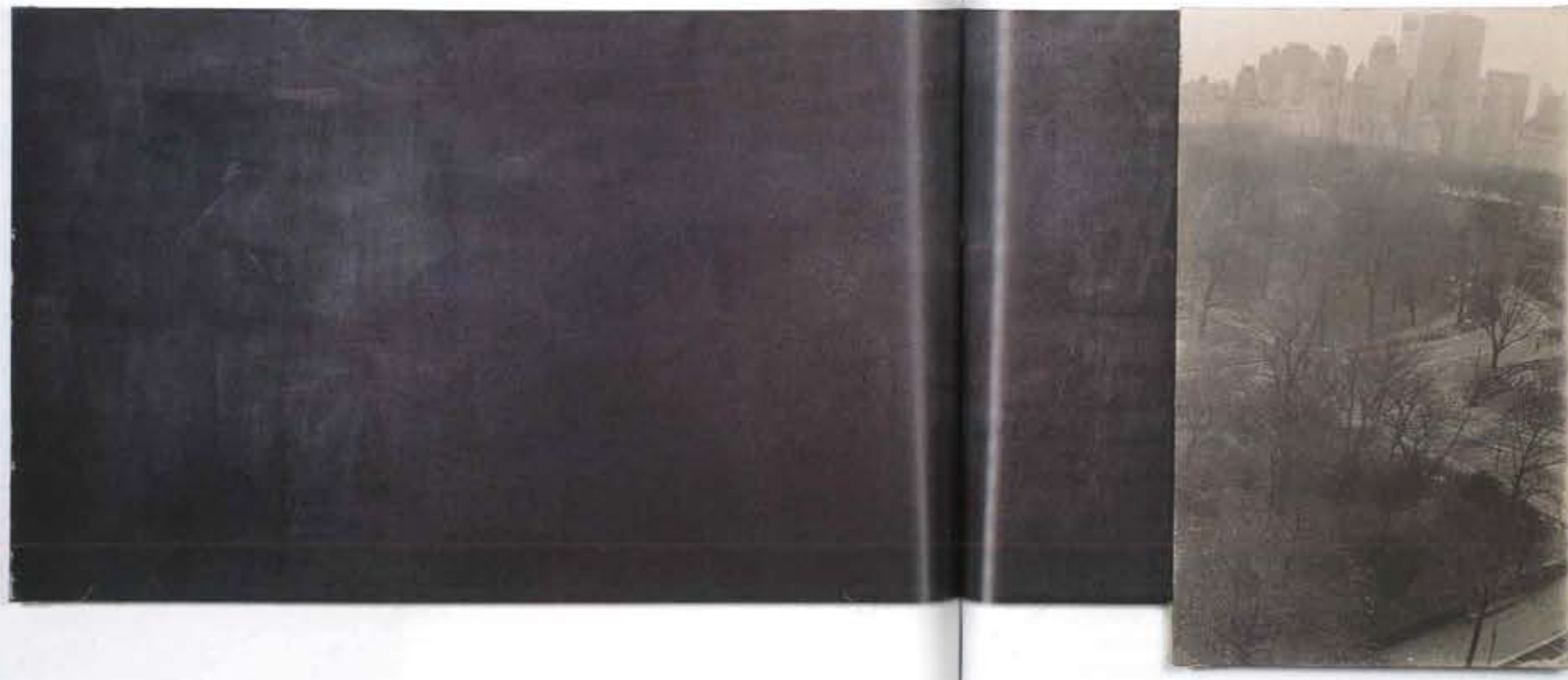
As Sugiura was showing me works in the back room of her studio, she admitted that for two years in the 1970s, following her showing in the Whitney Annual, she had tried being a minimalist painter but that it was a disaster. It was only when she put painting and photography together, side by side, that she found new potentials in each. She showed me one composition that features a photograph of a road through the woods, paired with a green-painted canvas. She compared her work to "analytical cubism," as if she had extracted the green from the image and given it its own material, physical space. Looking at another work from the series, *The Station* (1978), she explained its story: she was waiting for the train one evening after visiting her mother in Long Island, and there was an incredible sunset. She took a photograph of it, and later paired the black-and-white image with a bright red canvas.

The logic of combination in these works is not always as clear as it is in the white-painted canvas below *Winter Branches* (1977–78), which immediately suggests an unseen snowy landscape. For example,



(Top)
ASPHALT, 1977, photo emulsion, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 71 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.

(Bottom)
VIEW FROM DAKOTA, 1979, photo emulsion, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 244 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo.



“When I was in school, I always thought photography was as important as painting or sculpture. But in those days, if I said I took photographs, most artists would say, ‘You are not a real artist.’”

neither the red canvas below a close-up of a street surface in *Asphalt* (1977), the yellow canvas next to a picture of a wooden floor in *Yellow Floor* (1977), nor the long black canvas next to a vertical image of Central Park seen from above in *View from Dakota* (1979), offers up an intuitive reading of the color's relationship to the photograph. Sugiura said: "I always think, when a new combination happens, more interesting things also happen. It's also a shortcut. For artists, it's a good impulse to kick out the conventions."

By the late 1970s, she began framing compositions of canvases, adding a sculptural element. The second work of hers shown in "For a New World to Come" was *Deadend Street* (1978). In this composition, there are two nearly identical pairs: an imperfectly black-painted canvas next to a canvas printed with an image of a street beneath the iron arches of an elevated train track. Another smaller pair sits to the right, and the whole composition is framed with wooden bars, with an empty space between them. On closer inspection, the two photographs are of the same place, but are different images. The one on the right seems to have been taken after it has rained; on the larger canvas on the left, the street is dry and the structure overhead casts long shadows. Correspondingly, the black canvases have different textures as well: the one on the right next to the wet street has a glossy texture, while the one on the left has a matte finish. Framed together, the enigmatic pairs become sculptural. Setting up a comparison recalls various conceptual-art semiotic riddles from the late 1970s, yet seems to be more elusive than prescriptive, or, in a word Sugiura used about her own work, more "metaphysical" than didactic.

One thing that stood out to me about these combinations of media was the way the photo-emulsion and painted canvases were so brushily painted. She explained, "I like to put enough photo emulsion on the canvas so I can get the images, but it's not important to me whether it's perfect or not. Maybe that's because I like things like *kintsugi*, which are broken [ceramics] but repaired with gold. It's an Oriental idea." With this evocation of *wabi-sabi* aesthetic principles, I asked about her tendency to interweave hybrid elements into traditionally purist practices, such as painting and photography. Her response was indirect: "I think my works are very challenging to define because I come from Japanese society, where women have more pressure to behave a certain way: to be feminine or to be thoughtful but not too expressive. Here it really doesn't matter; you are 'minor' because you are female. It was just the way people accepted me. I felt I could do whatever I wanted and nobody cared, so I felt much freer."

After looking at the artworks in her studio, Sugiura and I had tea. She told me more about the early days of living in New York. The previous occupants of her studio had been three women who were the founders of the radical feminist group Redstockings; they had held a consciousness-raising meeting every week and people still dropped by, even after they had left. She joked that they had tried to "brainwash" her into using her art for explicitly feminist purposes. "I understood feminism; I agreed to those ideas but I didn't know how to use my art for that purpose," Sugiura told me. She said she has always appreciated living in the United States, especially because of how topics of race and gender are openly discussed, but she also noted that everything was immediately politicized in a way she finds simplistic. "We are much more sophisticated," she said.

Sugiura's next breakthrough came in 1981 when she started making photograms, following a five-month period when she didn't make any artworks. She told me, "I wanted to create something really simple. I decided to make a photogram, so I started drawing on photo paper in the darkroom." One of these sketch-like images, from 1982, was a portrait called *Daisy*, published in issue eight of *Bomb* magazine. The work features wide brushstrokes resembling sunflower petals for hair and a slightly psychedelic halo. Another, *Tricky Cad* (1984), which Taka Ishii Gallery showed at its booth at Art Basel Hong Kong in March 2017, a few weeks after I visited Sugiura, is an energetic, layered abstraction of cut-out forms including a silhouetted hand, wandering brushstrokes and looping lines that



(This page)
NAMU (3), 1994, unique toned gelatin silver print, 102 x 76 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

(Opposite page)
THE BOXING PAPERS (SHINOHARA), 1999, unique gelatin silver print, 203 x 152 cm. Copyright Kunié Sugiura. Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York.

look like they had been made in spray paint—another synchronous echo, this time of 1980s New York, though it looks as if it had been made this year. Apparently this phase in Sugiura's career didn't last long. "People said these were still drawings, not photographs—and I agreed—so I decided to make photograms, more like what Moholy-Nagy had done," she mentioned.

She embarked on several series—"Botanicus" (1989), "Cut Flowers" (1990s) and "Stacks" (1990s)—that instead of using brushes, utilized objects placed on photographic paper. She gravitated toward nature, initially flowers, which she would gather from the flower markets in Manhattan and then arrange into abstract compositions on photopaper. The series "Stacks" was titled as a reference to Donald Judd's sculptural compositions of the same name, with the flower stems forming geometric lines across the page. Yet it's easy to notice that the outlines of many leaves—particularly when Sugiura would make a positive image—resembled the brushstrokes of an ink painter. She told her New York gallerist Leslie Tonkonow in a 2012 interview: "My photograms incorporate the traditions of my Japanese background both knowingly and unknowingly." She explained in the same conversation that "in Asian art there has always been a co-existence of the real and the abstract; for example, flowers and birds are rendered realistically in a simplified space, painted in one color. It is a partial realism, pointing out the ephemerality of living."

Sugiura's interest in flowers also relates to the history of photography—particularly the cyanotypes of early photographic pioneer and botanist Anna Atkins. Sugiura herself articulated this in 2015, when she showed a series called "Pressed Specimens" (1991) for a November 2015 exhibition at Kamakura Gallery in Kanagawa, Japan. The series recorded the forms of small plants, alongside a series of small oil paintings based on plant forms that Sugiura made in 2004 and 2005. She wrote in the show's catalog: "When I was studying photography during the 1960s, neither the name of Anna nor her images were mentioned in history. It was after more than 20 years that I encountered her seaweed blue prints. I noticed her radical spirit. She combined ancient and contemporary methods."

The flower markets led Sugiura to think about other kinds of natural materials that were more ephemeral, and more alive. To create the seven-part work *The Kitten Papers* (1992), she coralled a pair of cats to spend the night in the darkroom on a large (40 by 30 inches) sheet of photographic paper. In the morning, Sugiura would then expose the paper, fixing streaks and traces of the animals' movements from the night before, including what appears to be their urine stains—perhaps a humorous riff on Andy Warhol's "Oxidation" abstractions (1977–78), which were made by having his friends urinate on wet copper-metallic paint. Sugiura followed this series with other very "painterly" photograms created with

the unwitting participation of living creatures, including three abstract, blue-toned prints made with a fish taken out of water for the series "Namu" (1994), which Sugiura displays with a plexiglass tank of blue-colored water. Later images feature silhouetted frogs, with traces of their tentative hopping around on the photo paper. These works evoke very considered attempts at the hybridization of artistic genres—particularly painting and photography—that characterizes Sugiura's works. In the same 2015 catalog for the Kamakura Gallery exhibition, she wrote this reflection of her practice: "We may assume (as a principle) that photography (photographing) is objective and that painting (rendering) is subjective. Usually an artist chooses either approach, but I choose a method that ties the two together, makes them parallel or combines them. [...] My adaptation of photography and painting may also illuminate the double structure of my identity as a Japanese individual living in the West."

I asked Sugiura about her long-distance relationship with Japan since she left. She had her first show there in 1978, and has exhibited every few years at Zeit-Foto gallery in Tokyo since then, and at Kamakura Gallery since the early 1990s. When she moved to New York initially, there was also a Japanese network, and curators would visit New York on Japan Foundation research trips. Sugiura recalled that she used to be invited by the Japanese art community for parties that lasted until the morning. "Sometimes I found a little bit of acceptance," she said of those times, "but they didn't know where to place me because I didn't study in Japan and also I was doing photography." She was friendly with Hiroshi Sugimoto as well as artists Ushio and Noriko Shinohara, who had individually moved to New York around the same time she had. In 1986, Sugiura began working for the Japanese art magazine *Bijutsu Techo*, sending them photographs of exhibitions in New York. In 1988, *Bijutsu Techo* asked her to write about these shows as well, which she did for 20 years, seeing upward of 50 exhibitions a month. She met many artists this way, and also began taking slides of their work for them. In much later days, that led to a series of "shadow" photograms of her artist-friends and other artists whom she admired, beginning with a four-panel photogram portrait of the "Neo-Dadaist" Ushio Shinohara boxing—recalling his ironic technique of dipping boxing gloves in ink and punching the paper—and then portraits of other artists including Jasper Johns, Joan Jonas, Mark di Suvero, Yayoi Kusama and Takashi Murakami, who appear in the photograms as silhouettes. One notable exception to the series is a "portrait" of Atsuko Tanaka, which was in fact a photogram of a friend wearing an electric dress like Atsuko Tanaka's famous wearable sculpture. Sugiura mentioned that she had later met Tanaka and her husband Akira Kanayama in 2004 and left the encounter promising to bring them a print next time, though the famous female Gutai artists died before they could meet again.

These days, Kunié Sugiura says she is visiting Japan more regularly, twice a year. "I started going to Japan for travel, because I realized I didn't know anything about it. I had left when I was 20. I started visiting historical places. I am not very interested in seeing replicas of ancient castles, but I like nature so I started exploring places that are very hard to reach. These are very old geologies, some of them 300,000 years old when they used to be at the bottom of the sea or the lake. I go and take pictures." She pointed to the studio walls where several new works were in progress. "I would like to know where I come from, and where my mother comes from," she remarked.

In her artwork at least, her Japanese heritage has been intangibly present from the beginning, though not as a marker of identity in itself. Sugiura's "minor" point of view—stemming from what she called the "double structure" of her identity—has allowed her to reflect on the orthodoxies of painting and photography from a perspective that is neither wholly of one or the other. It is a singular position—and perhaps a bit of a lonely one, in art historical terms—but it is also one that is entirely her own. ●

"I always think, when a new combination happens, more interesting things also happen. It's also a shortcut. For artists, it's a good impulse to kick out the conventions."

