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Art in America

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REVIEWS MAY 21, 2012

Kunie Sugiura

NEW YORK, at Leslie Tonkonow

by Anne Doran

In photographer Kunié Sugiura's sixth show at Leslie Tonkonow, a group of works made in the late 1970s conjured a grittier New York City. Each work juxtaposes one or more canvases printed with black-and-white images of drab apartment towers, decrepit warehouses and potholed streets with thinly brushed monochrome paintings. Spare and lovely, they bring together Japanese and Western influences, documentary and painterly expression, and the avant-garde impulses of the '60s with those of the early 20th century.

Born in 1942 in Nagoya, Japan, Sugiura attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1960s.

There, one of her teachers was conceptual photographer Kenneth Josephson, himself a graduate of the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology—originally the New Bauhaus—and its famously experimentalist photography program. (Her unique color prints from this period, incidentally, would look at home with work being made now by a new generation of process-oriented American photographers—many of them, including Talia Chetrit, Jessica LaBatte and Aspen Mays, also SAIC graduates—whose pictures likewise have in them a little of European modernism's DNA.)



In 1967, Sugiura moved to New York. Without the resources to print in color, she began to work in black and white. Inspired by the scale of photo-based work by Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, among others, she used liquid photo emulsion to print her images—for instance, close-ups of a couple having sex and enlarged pictures of natural surfaces like bark and stone—onto large canvases, endowing them with the

physical presence of paintings. By the late '70s, in a nod to Ellsworth Kelly's diptychs, she was combining her photo-canvases with solid-color panels to create assemblages like those in this exhibition.

Among the works on view was *Two Boats* (1979), which features a canvas printed with a view of a pier and a couple of ferryboats seen from a distance-the image tilted within the rectangular picture plane as in a Rodchenko composition. Attached to the canvas's left edge is a slightly smaller, much narrower, rather scuffed panel painted black. Showing a clear debt to Rauschenberg's sprawling *Cardboards* and *Jammers*, *DEADEND STREET* (1978) is an approximately 3-by-9-foot work in which two differently sized elements-each a pairing of an image of elevated train tracks with a black canvas-are brought together inside a frame made of battered strips of wood. The use of the empty space between them to balance the composition, however, is more reminiscent of a Japanese scroll.

Also included in the exhibition were studies on paper for these and similar works, as well as a few recent pieces that revisit the same format-this time using commercial digital printing on canvas. The works, while unmistakably contemporary, also recall the particular Japanese esthetic, rooted in Zen Buddhism and long associated with the tea ceremony, that favors things simple, unfinished and fleeting. All, whether two or 30 years old, looked new, bright and very fresh.

Photo: Kunié Sugiura: *Two Boats*, 1979, photo emulsion and acrylic on canvas, 38½ by 3½ inches; at Leslie Tonkonow.