

Art in America



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**Kunié Sugiura
Leon Golub
Asian Body Art
David Smith**

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Shadow Play

In her layered, time-based photograms and other cameraless images of flowers, animals and people, Kunié Sugiura explores stasis and movement, order and chance.



Above, Kunié Sugiura: The Kitten Papers, 1992, seven gelatin silver prints on shelf with text, each 40 by 30 inches.

Left, Rose Veins 2, 1990, gelatin silver print on aluminum, 40 by 30 inches.

BY JANET KOPLOS

Photograms, those ghostly records of light deflected by artfully arranged objects on photosensitive paper, took on new life—literally—in Kunié Sugiura's hands. One of her distinctive avenues early on was to use living, moving creatures as subjects. Her traveling show of work from 1989 to '99 opened with *The Kitten Papers* (1992), in which she corralled two kittens overnight on an expanse of photo paper. She repeated the procedure for a week, and the result was a group of seven unique gelatin-silver prints in which the forms of the kittens are partly visible—presumably where they slept—and streaks indicate their movement. In addition, there are splatters and pours of urine, which created splotches of color. One imagines the artist coming into the studio in the morning, picking up the soiled papers and developing them to see a report of the kittens' behavior.

In this work, several principles long present in Sugiura's work are evident. One is time, her constant theme. Another is her engagement with chance. A third is her almost journalistic factuality, without technical tweaking, as it happens, even without using a camera. This straightforwardness has been true of nearly all Sugiura's art, even before the period covered by this exhibition and the new work shown in December and January at Leslie Tonkonow gallery in New York's Chelsea. Her low-key "reporting" can be seen, for example, in her paintinglike works that were included in the 1972 Whitney Biennial: abstracted enlargements of tiny architectural or natural details such as tree bark, which she printed on photosensitized canvas and sometimes embellished with acrylic.

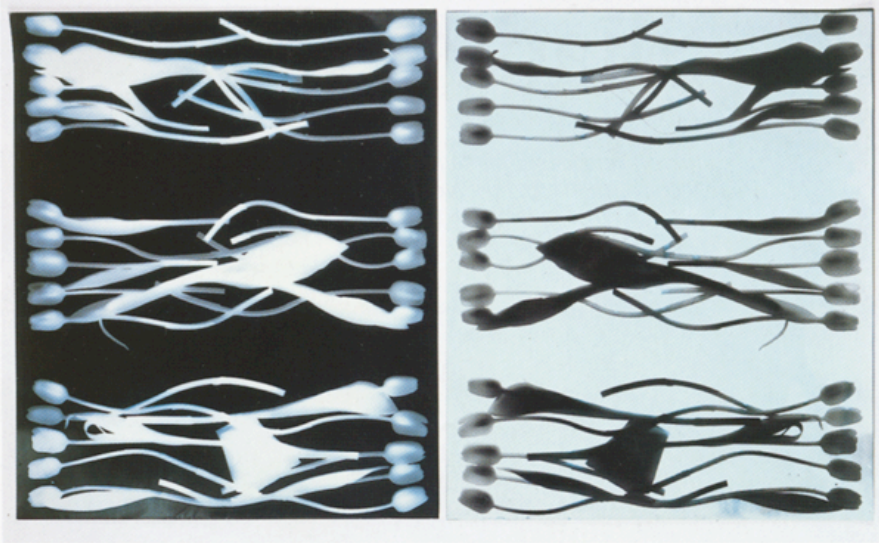
Sugiura (it's pronounced with a hard g, and her first name is koo-ni-eh) came to the U.S. from Japan in 1963 to study photography at the

School of the Art Institute of Chicago before moving to New York in 1968. She chose photograms as a way of making pictures with a minimum of equipment and technology. She needs only light, photosensitive paper, an object to block the light and chemicals to fix the image afterward. In its original state, a photogram is a negative. Where the subject has been, the paper remains pale, while a surplus of light blackens the page. Sugiura often uses the photogram as a paper negative to print a positive, in which the subject becomes a black silhouette.

Flowers

The earliest work in the traveling show was *Tower* (1989), a dark still life centered on a glass vase containing ferns and a few small blossoms. The vase, which seems to float in a sea of curls, spatters and rivulets of black, is a milky, translucent object with a circle of intense white at its shoulder level. As a whole, the image seems eerie and unfamiliar, more portentous than domestic.

Subsequent works with flowers demonstrate an interest in visual order: laid out carefully on photographic paper, the flowers are never scattered but always arranged in some sort of pattern. In a 1990 piece, roses with long, spindly stems are placed to form a sunburst, their blossoms defining a central spiral and their stems radiating outward. The background is a cloudscape that is toned slightly pinkish. Since then, Sugiura has engaged in a great many variations: lilies set in parallel vertical lines, blossoms meeting in the middle of the paper or marching along the top and bottom borders; tulips thatched in an organic grid; sets of five tulips, blossoms at the left and right margins of the paper, stems and leaves making a ragged musical staff. In these works, geome-



Stacks Tulips C6/ Stacks Tulips C6 Positive, 1997, diptych, toned gelatin silver prints, each 24 by 20 inches.

Hoppings D Positive, 1996, toned gelatin silver print on aluminum, 30 by 40 inches.



try is the ordering principle, but nature's imperfection controls the impression. The blossoms may be dark (positive) or light (negative), and in the latter case the exposing light caresses the flowers, giving either a hint of contour or an appearance of translucence.

In other flower works, Sugiura has separated blossoms from their stems and strung the flower heads on wires. She threads different kinds of blooms on relaxed wires that join together in a single "stem," like some miraculously grafted composite. She sets others on radiating taut wires that look precisely suspended in an ambiguous deep space suggested by a dark, smoky background. She also places small leaves along horizontally stretched wires, where they recall birds gracefully gathered on telephone wires.

The life in the flower photograms is quite stilled, of course. The flowers are cut and have begun a process of wilting and desiccation that is halted in the image. The systematic arrangements of the flower works contrast sharply with the free organization of the creature works.

Creatures

Besides the kittens, Sugiura has taken as her subjects various small aquatic creatures such as octopi, squids and frogs that she could obtain (sometimes alive) in Chinatown, near her studio. In making these pieces, she sets the conditions, chooses the background colors and edits to select the most satisfying results. The live animals can't be choreographed, so the composition of an image is largely random. The time span involved in her subjects' movements is captured in a manner that is nonfilmic because it is not sequential, yet it is also not quite ordinary photography because the evidence of time is layered into the surface rather than caught in a decisive moment.

A mottled blue and white background suggests sky and clouds in the three *Hoppings* prints included in the show (all 1996). Frogs, whether sitting or jumping, seem to be airborne in that sky. These works are positives, so the amphibians are sharp, black silhouettes. *Squids* and *Sea Creatures* (both 1990) render their subjects in negative, while the background is a shadowy mixture of sepia tones; the shadows make a fluid abstraction that could almost be a painted composition.

A 1994 installation called *Namu (Catfish)* consists of three large photograms of fish and, in the middle of the room, a 40-by-30-by-13-inch Plexiglas tank filled with water tinted a tropical blue (sans catfish). The negative-image fish in each print seems dreamlike as it swims against an expressionistic background that could be a rolling sea or, again, a sky—this time a stormy one. The pale catfish looks like a magical creature escaped from its tank to swim through the air.

People

In the mid-'90s, Sugiura started to explore the human body. At first, she collaged film negatives or X-rays. She titled a fishlike image incorporating a human spine *Patient Zero* (1993); other humanoid configurations were *Cranium Tree* (1992) and *Bowel Man* (1994). But not until 1999 did she make photograms of living people. Bill Arning, in his essay for the catalogue of the traveling show, says that in these works she is not making photograms but fixing shadows. It is a small but valid distinction, for the people do not touch the photo paper, only their shadows do.

The inspiration for the new series was Sugiura's acquaintance with Ushio Shinohara, another Japanese expatriate in New York who, as a young avant-garde artist in Tokyo in 1958, had staged a "boxing painting" performance. He did it again for her. In silhouette, the boxer punches a suspended five-gallon paint bucket and spatters dark matter across a grid of four large sheets of photo paper in the most spectacular images from this series (*The Boxing Papers, Shinohara A Positive and B Positive*). In the exhibition, there are also several other images of pairs of boxers, both male and female, positive and negative. These do not include paint, but some show minor spatters—sweat rather than blood, one hopes.

In Sugiura's technically direct prints, geometry is often the organizing principle, but nature controls the impression.



Patient Zero, 1993, two toned gelatin silver prints, Plexiglas box, 67½ by 27½ by 6 inches.



Jasper Johns Photogram B, 2001, gelatin silver print, 39 1/2 by 29 1/2 inches.

In her recent show at Leslie Tonkonow, titled "The Artist Papers," the Shinohara series was shown again, along with images of other artists, all of whom are identified in the titles of the works. A double portrait presents the distinctive silhouette of the Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner—beard, hair knot and all—his lanky form in motion writing a formula in one image and a sort of arabesque in the other. Both inscriptions appear to hang in the air, appropriately representing products of his mind. Another portrait, again exhibited in both positive and negative, silhouettes the head and shoulders of a stocky man with a slightly hunched posture. His profile might seem vaguely familiar, but he probably would not be readily identifiable if he were not accompanied by the motif of a hand seemingly dragged through paint—Jasper Johns's most familiar "self-portrait" sign in his own work.

Other artist-subjects are less recognizable: Neil Jenney, in a baseball uniform and helmet, swings a bat in one picture and looks ready to pitch in another, a glove on one hand and a ball in the other, not seen but implied. Cheryl Donegan is shown with arms raised and knees bent, leaning back so that her body in profile

Lawrence Weiner D,
2001, gelatin silver print,
28 1/2 by 39 1/2 inches.



makes an angular S. She's presented in negative, with brownish splatters at bottom and right. A tousle-haired Patty Chang appears in profile in the lower right quadrant of the sheet with her mouth open and upper teeth clearly silhouetted. A second figure is cut off at the left. The pose is not easily explicable but leaves one thinking about Nauman's photographic self-portrait as a fountain, as well as a famously transgressive Mapplethorpe photograph. The imagery is striking in all these "artist papers," whether or not one recognizes the portrait subjects.

In another tribute to a Japanese avant-gardist, Sugiura restaged the 1956 *Electric Dress* performance of the Gutai artist Atsuko Tanaka. Gutai artists concocted events that in later terminology would be called Happenings. Tanaka decked herself in strands of illuminated electric lightbulbs of all colors. Sugiura's restaging, using a local woman as the model, involved strings of Christmas-tree lights. The silhouetted figure is washed with strange bands of yellow that seem radiantly supernatural. Unlike the other "artist papers" in the show, this image is not a direct portrait of the artist. But Tanaka's performance has assumed legendary status both in Japan and among followers of performance art everywhere, and a photograph of it has been widely reproduced. Sugiura's homage is perhaps the most memorable image in the show, a fitting link between two Japanese women artists fascinated with light.

Photograms, with the object in contact with the photo paper, are necessarily life-size, and Sugiura has kept her "fixed shadows" of people sharp and close to life-size as well. With their minimal technical apparatus and direct correspondence to their subjects, photograms seem more unmediated than photographs have lately become. They are not windows into a real (or contrived) space but something else. The subjects—shadowed rather than revealed—reflect truths but retain a degree of privacy. Active and factual yet ethereal and poetic, Sugiura's works recall sense of alchemy of the earliest photographs. □

"Kumi Sugiura: Dark Matters/Light Affairs" was organized by Pamela Auchincloss Arts Management Services, New York. It opened at the Francis Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, N.Y. (June 30-Sept. 17, 2000), and traveled to the Sandra and David Bakalar Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston (Nov. 8-Dec. 23, 2000). The exhibition was accompanied by a 40-page catalogue with essays by Bill Arning and Joel Smith. "Kumi Sugiura: The Artist Papers and other works" was shown at Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York (Dec. 7, 2001-Feb. 2, 2002). Selected works by Sugiura will appear in the group show "Art in Science" at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (Nov. 9, 2002-Feb. 9, 2003).

After Electric Dress B p2,
2001, four toned gelatin
silver prints, 69 by 44 1/2
inches overall. Photos
this article courtesy the
artist, Pamela Auchincloss,
Arts Management Services,
and Leslie Tonkonow
Artworks + Projects,
New York.

