

Ahead of Time: Interdisciplinarity and Activism in the Artistic and Cultural Practices of Aiko Suzuki

Transcript of a talk presented by Cindy Mochizuki in association with the launch of Midi Onodera's collaborative DVD project 'Tributaries: Reflections of Aiko Suzuki.'

Thank you all for coming out this evening. I'd like to thank the National Nikkei Museum and Heritage Centre and especially Beth Carter who curated this exhibition and talk, as well as Miko Hoffman and Nichola for all the technical aid.

I feel that this is a very timely exhibition. If you haven't had a chance to go downstairs and see it, *Tributaries: Reflections on Aiko Suzuki* is open until August 28, so please go see it. I think it's an important exhibition of a Canadian artist whose work I believe has not been recognized to its full potential. Aiko was born in Vancouver and moved to Ontario with her family after the war. This is a project that remembers and revisits her life and practice in collaboration with several other significant Canadian artists including Midi Onodera, Ann Southam, Joy Kogawa, Grace Channer and Aiko's daughter Chiyoko Szlavnic. Each of these artists has also made very significant contributions to Canadian art, new music, animation and multi-media. Therefore, this talk places Aiko's work in dialogue with current practicing women artists who are making work in a multidisciplinary fashion. I also would like to thank Midi Onodera and Chiyoko Szlavnic for providing me with the visuals, some of which you'll see today.

This talk is titled *Ahead of Time: Interdisciplinarity and Activism in the Artistic and Cultural Practices of Aiko Suzuki*. I'd like to begin this talk by locating her work in the context of interdisciplinary practice, or what we would call in 2010 cultural community activist-based practices. This is what a lot of younger artists are doing, working in and amongst multiple mediums, and wearing different hats - doing curatorial work, working with different artists from different disciplines, being able to take a leadership role in all those different disciplines and



Aiko in her studio beside one of her suspension pieces.

combining them into a singular practice. I'd also like to look at the work to expose how she overcame certain kinds of limitations and expectations placed on her as an artist of her generation. It was a different place and time as a Canadian, woman artist making work in the '60s and '70s. There were different kinds of expectations and limitations placed on her practice.

Even within those expectations she still persevered and continued on her own path. So you'll see that in the work she makes, you'll see it in the ways in which she pushes against the mediums she works in - she worked a lot with fibre-based and installation work. So she's working with the form and the context and coming up with different surprises, working against the grain of what people might have expected her to do. She was also working within the context of being a feminist artist, a racialized body, and a

Japanese-Canadian artist.

Suzuki, in an interview with Midi Onodera as part of their *Tributaries* series, claims that she stayed with a medium until she got immersed in it and then left it behind. Therefore, she abandoned the medium and then took on different approaches in different mediums.

But despite the fact that she had this type of chaotic practice, I'd like to argue that she was very doggedly serious and focused in her work. It may appear that she was all over the place doing different things but there was always a very strong thread in her work and now, as we look back on it, I hope you will start to see the thread that runs through her work. And even through the different experimentations she made while working through the various mediums, I think at the very end, and especially in her last work, you'll see how all the different mediums came together for her.

I'd also like to place her interdisciplinary practice with and beside her work as a cultural activist. Aiko curated many exhibitions. She was a mentor to many different artists and performed all these roles within a feminist perspective. A lot of the work at the time, especially around the '80s and '90s, was very male dominated and also very Eurocentric. So, Aiko brought together a lot of marginalized artists during that time - Japanese, First Nations, and indigenous artists.

I would like to give you a brief biography of Aiko. Aiko Suzuki was born October 22, 1937 in Marpole B.C. and was a prolific artist who worked in a wide variety of media, ranging from textiles, to spray paint, to acrylic and oils, to monoprints. In 1942 Aiko and her family were interned in Slocan and after the war, relocated to London, Ontario. Aiko's work extends beyond the canvas to include three-dimensional sculptures, including dance and theatre sets. She had a long time collaborator, Patricia Beatty who was a co-founder of the Toronto Dance Theatre and she was also involved in arts education through direct, hands-on film animation, and other arts workshops. She also mentored countless students throughout Toronto for more than 25

years. On December 31, 2005 Aiko passed away of breast cancer at the age of 68.

Aiko took a bit of an unconventional route for the time, as she immediately entered art school after high school in the 1950s and immersed herself in a very male-centered school of art in London that focused on abstract painting. She also studied under Rick Gorman, and Mashel Teitelbaum in Toronto.

She mentions in an interview that although she was taught by male painters, and was in and around those male-centric art circles, they never engaged in conversation about her work. Women artists in general were treated as the periphery, therefore, she was never the centre of discussion.

Her work was highly experimental, very minimalist, but rooted in abstract expressionism. She pushed the boundaries of her practice, but she also knew when to stop. She also really appreciated the

happy accidents in her work. Her first solo show was in 1967 at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. At the time Aiko was pregnant with her daughter Chiyoko and hid the fact that she was pregnant for fear that it would jeopardize her career as a serious artist.

This work [next page] was also accompanied by an audio piece so when you walked into the gallery there was the murmuring of the audio piece. I want to read you something in order to capture the tenor of the time. This is an article from the *Globe and Mail* by Kay Kritzweiser, and I think Kay is a man but I'm not sure.

Once you beg to have the sound track shut off at Pollock Gallery, It's possible to evaluate the paintings by Aiko Suzuki in the lower gallery. It may break the young painter's heart, but that recorded sound adds nothing to her work. To accomplish its purpose as an integral part of a



Aiko working on one of her large-scale paintings.



Aiko jumping through her studio.

painting, sound must be professionally done. This isn't. Instead of heart thumps, meant to emphasize the titanic struggle of man breaking out of his environment, the sound is merely a distraction. Miss Suzuki's *Release* series is strong enough on its own. Her man at the core of each work fights progressively through graphics, a diptych, broken circles, and in the case of *Release No. 10*, most excitingly out of a stunning shaped canvas of blues and broken mauves.

So you kind of get some of the ideas of the time as well as a sense of the way in which she was already starting to play with the idea of inter-disciplinary practices in multi-media. Even amongst the framework of abstract expressionist painting, she would bring in audio work and the reviewers weren't quite understanding it or seeing the purpose of it.

At this point she started working with acrylics and collage and



From the "Release" series (1967), 24" diameter, Acrylic on canvas and wood.

you'll see that she starts referencing natural landscapes. She also starts to bring in this kind of moody work that's self-reflexive, and also begins to reference 10th Century Japanese masterworks such as Sesshu and Hokusai's work. You'll see in her piece *Sesshu in Six Parts*, that she's referencing the Japanese masterwork by Sesshu Toyo. You'll begin to recognize a sort of minimal reference

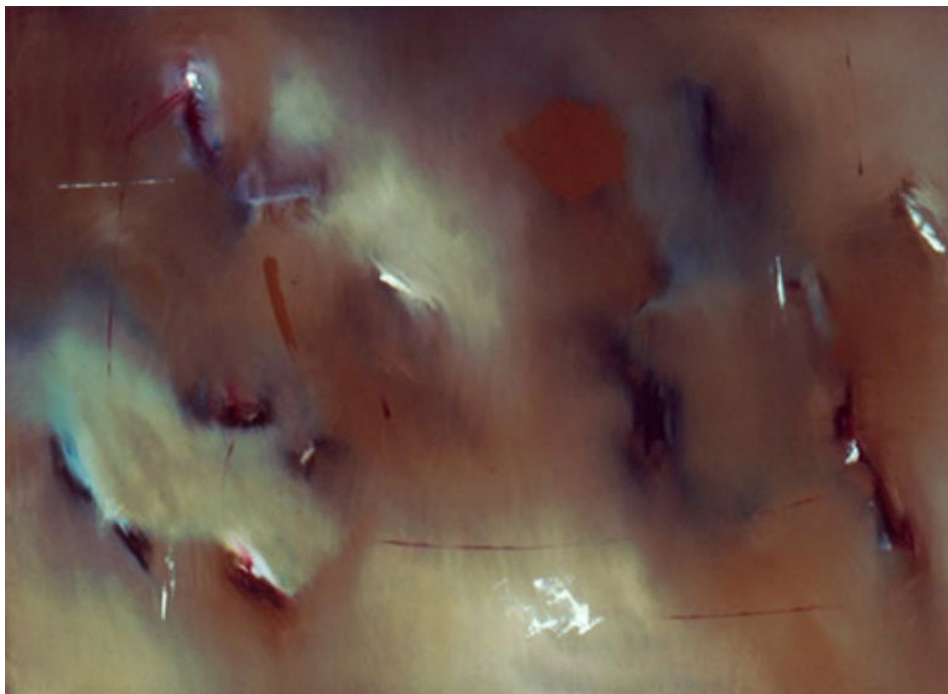
to Japanese aesthetics. You might be seeing them as 6 different Shoji screens as she was also playing with this idea of 'yohaku-no-bi' or the 'beauty of the blank space.' Therefore, much of her work contains this idea of the long pond, the long drop, or long smear as it plays with space, light and this idea of reflection.

I brought it [Toyo Sesshu's '8 Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers,' on next page] just as a reference for what she's paying homage to. She is, in a way, going back into her Japanese roots or Asian roots and this is sort of coming through the painting consciously or unconsciously. I'm also going to show 2 examples of monoprints and both of these are untitled. She did monoprints off and on, and these ones are missing a reference to the year they were made. But again, you'll start to see a sort of Asian aesthetic as well as a kind of gesturely, painterly motion applied to her prints. You'll also begin to see these kinds of Shoji screen-like panes and panels in the work and this carries

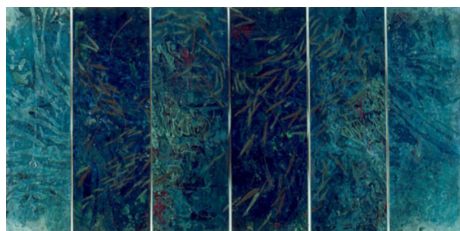
through to the video work she does later in her career.

The process for these works is similar to that of Zen painting. She'll kind of smear paint onto the plate, each plate is unique to the one print and then she wipes the plate clean, so it's a one time print and this is the only the record of it. Later on she starts to play with Japanese washi paper which becomes a combination of collage and print work.

Around the year 1969, Aiko started to move away from two-dimensional work and started to collaborate with theatre and dance artists. She established a collaboration with Patricia Beatty and ended up doing a series of sets for her dance company, Toronto Dance Theatre. Patricia Beatty is a well-known modern dance choreographer.



"Still Life of Pond" (1985), 27" X 39", Acrylic on paper



"Sesshu in Six Parts" (2001)

She's the author of a seminal dance text called *Form Without Formula*. In the book she talked about how form and content are constantly reinventing one another. Therefore both of them working together make the piece, or form the material entity of the work. This gives you an idea of some of the other feminists who were working at the time, as well as with whom Aiko collaborated with and who was being drawn into her circle at the time.

Here [next page - Henry Morgan's *Delicate Balance*, 1973],

she's building a string-like structure, kind of like a hammock or like a cocoon for the performer to be in - now moving from 2-D space to 3-D space. In this period, she has a different consideration of light, time, bodies and space and therefore has a lot of different things to play with.

Just after this I'll show you a series of work that moves off the 2-D plane and you'll see how she's been influenced a lot by the collaborations that are done with the theatre practitioners and dancers. It's during this period that Aiko meets and works with Ann Southam who is one of the composers that collaborated with Midi in the *Tributaries* project as well. At this time Aiko is also in production with other artists creating this series of what's called 'small, multi-media

pieces'. So I imagine they're happening with dancers and musicians as well. Here, she's kind of moving away from visual arts and into the realm of performing arts.

This is a piece called *Realm* [next page] and it's from 1985 and again, there's a suspended fibre piece as the backdrop for these performers who are moving in front of it. I apologize I don't have a lot of information on the dance pieces.

This dance set [next page] is called *Goblin Market* from 1986 (on DVD "Early Works" @ 1:58- 2:03) and I think it's with the Toronto Dance Theatre as well.

Then she moves into these pieces that she calls 'fibre suspensions'. There's an example of one, *Lyra Refrain* in this current exhibition down in the main lobby.



By Toyo Sesshu, "8 views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers," 41 inches by 29 inches.



"Goblin Market" (1986)



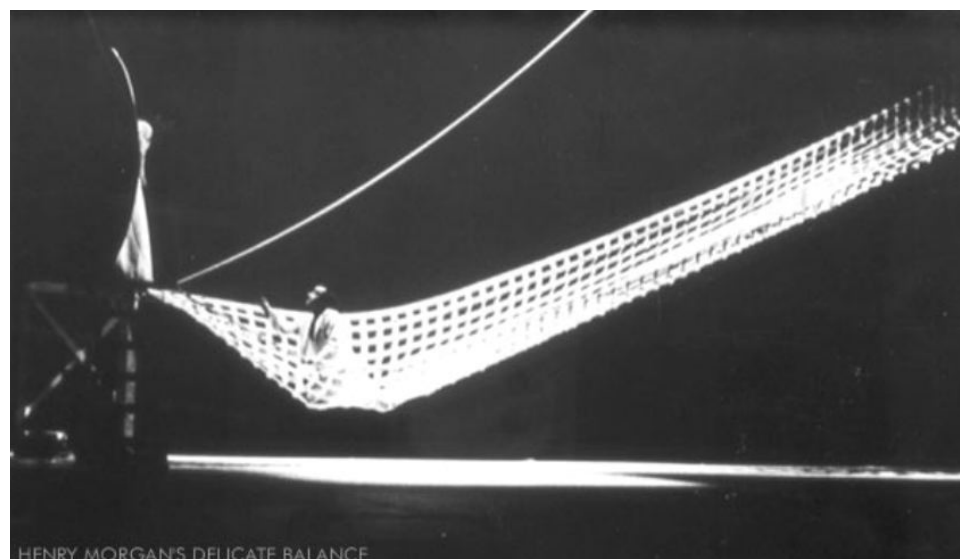
Above: "Realm" (1985)

Right: "Henry Morgan's Delicate Balance" (1973) (on DVD "Early Works" @ 1:39)

Hokosai Silvered (next page) was done in 1975 and it shows her move from the hard edge, abstract paintings in 2-D space, to a more structural piece that utilizes textiles. In this piece, nothing is ever woven or knotted and the only parameters are size, width, length. The lengths of the actual spines are the dowling, and she unspools the actual fibres on a special table. I think Beth and Miko and Jason put together that piece so they know what it's like for sure. It's very laborious. I imagine it takes a team to

install each of these works. The scale of something like that, I imagine is 6 feet, so she's working with rather large pieces of work. Suzuki also mentions her process as she moved around in the space she was working in, because she always considered her body as she made the works. For the 2-D works she would move forward and backwards. She'd make the

marks and then move back to see the work; but as the pieces grew into 3-D works, the movement turned into going up and down ladders. Her relationship to the piece changed while making these works. At some point she also started to build the structures in the studio space and use armatures as she called them, to move the piece around as well.





"Hokusai Silvered" (1975) (DVD, "Early Works", @3:40)

This is a photograph (right) of her preparing the piece *Lyra* in her studio. (DVD, "Early Works", @15:19) In the background this may be an example of the special table she used to prepare these installations. You can see that she is marking out the floor plan of the installation area of the library with tape.

Kerri Sakamoto talks about how she used string to draw lines in the air and a lot of her practice involved cutting away at the strings to reveal the negative space. These are similar kinds of strategies used in abstract expressionist work but this time she's using 3 dimensional materials. There's this tender act of love as she tends to the strings, mending and building the piece.

In 1981 she was commissioned to make a piece called *Lyra* (next page). *Lyra Refrain* is actually a smaller version of this work that was done in 1981 for the Metro Toronto Library. The library was designed by Raymond Moriyama. For the unveiling of the piece, the Toronto Dance Theatre produced a dance work that was performed in and amongst the sculptural structures of *Lyra*. I have a quote from the review in Arts Canada by Corinne Madel:

"...Negative spaces formed by cutting away of fibres, the



Aiko preparing the piece "Lyra" in her studio.

swagging of strands and deliberate intervals of suspended fibres not only provide visual rhythm and variety but also urge a contemplative attitude in the viewer."

So there's this idea that you can move through the space and it conjures up notions of contemplation and reflection.

Aiko claims she was a hunter and gatherer so she hunted around for materials, went to different factories and worked with what she had, in order to build a lot of these pieces. I don't know the size of this but it filled the foyer of the Metro Toronto Library, therefore it's quite large.

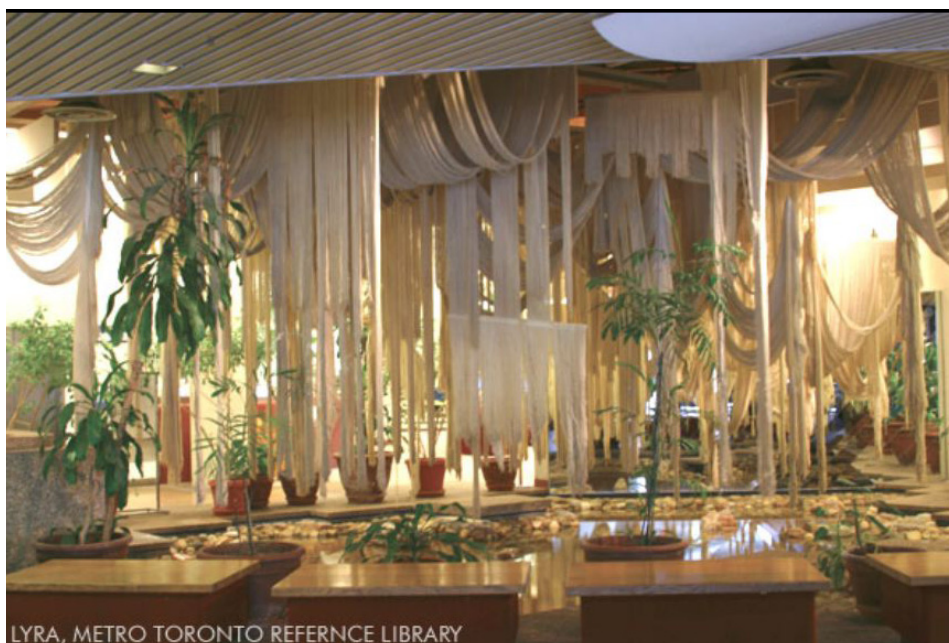
For Aiko, titles came after the work was made. She would make the pieces and name them after she worked through them. This is actually the last piece of this kind and this size that she made and it's called *Stanley Park Parade* (DVD, "Early Works", @12:58). It was made for what is now the Burnaby Art Museum in 1981. It was inspired by the darker greens and the forest in Stanley Park, and it was the last of its kind in size because she developed severe arthritis after this so she stopped making work at this scale.



"Esther Williams" (1977) (DVD, "Early Works", @9:59)



Above and to the right: "Lyra," 1981
Commissioned Sculpture, Metro Toronto
Reference Library. The black and white image is
of Lyra from Aiko's "Early Works" DVD, at 16:10



LYRA, METRO TORONTO REFERENCE LIBRARY



LYRA REFRAIN (1984)

"Lyra Refrain," 1984



STANLEY PARK PARKADE (1981)

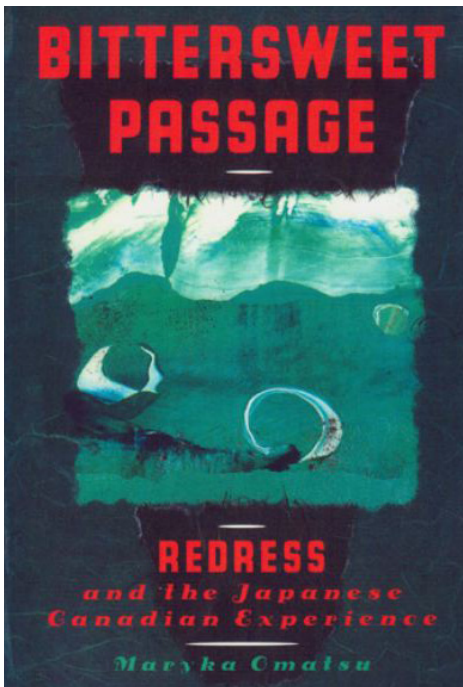
"Stanley Park Parkade," 1981

During the 1980s, Aiko, who was always passionate about social justice became much more active in the community as a curator and a cultural activist. Shortly after the Redress movement in 1988, she received a message from Joy Kogawa saying that on the west coast of Canada the Japanese Canadian Redress movement was going to go

forward. This opened a lot of cultural funding bodies for Japanese Canadians to make and produce work. I believe this spawned several different projects on the west coast and in the east in the 80s and 90s during the identity politics movement. Therefore, Aiko, in the East, organized several projects for many communities. For the Japanese Canadian community she organized a book project, a Directory of Japanese Canadians in the Arts, which was published by the Toronto Chapter of the NAJC in 1994. At this time, a lot of her work became covers, for example, for a book of poetry by Gerry Shikatani, an album cover for saxophonist Stan Getz, and some

non-fiction work as well.

Also during this time, she co-founded and chaired the Gendai Gallery (DVD, "Remembering Aiko", @7:51) which I believe is still located at the Toronto Japanese Cultural Centre. It was founded as a gallery dedicated to showing Pan-Asian, Asian-Canadian, and Asian-American artists. If you think about it, at that time, it was probably one of the first institutions with a very culturally specific mandate. Now we have the National Nikkei Heritage Centre, The Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art in Vancouver, and several different kinds of organizations. But at that time it was new and exciting to have a space



Aiko's book cover design for Maryka Omatsu's "Bittersweet Passage."

dedicated to that kind of research and Aiko spearheaded that as well. She also curated several exhibitions, and helped organize festivals such as the Earth Spirit Festival, which brought together First Nations artists and Japanese Canadian artists in 1992.

It is also during this time that Aiko started to create large-scale charcoal sketches. There are two that are downstairs in the exhibition space. They are based on a parcel that her father sent from Vancouver - 14 ft bamboo poles that were carefully wrapped. She thought of it as a gift of love and she didn't want to open it so



Above: "Homage to Nissei," (1994) multi-media installation; Below: "The Package," 1990, charcoal

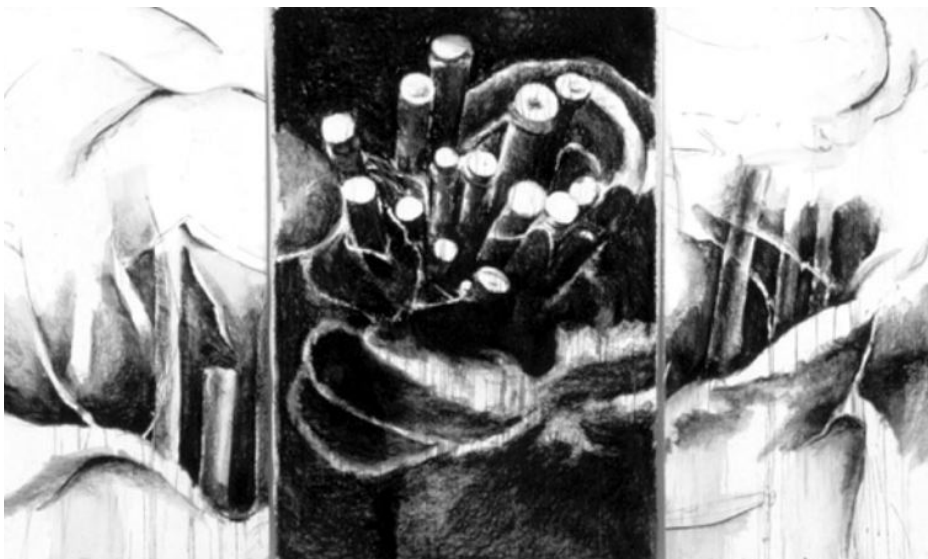
she carefully created these charcoal sketches as a triptych. It's called, The Package (1990) (DVD, "Early Works", @21:30). This piece also became another multi-media installation in 1994 called *Homage to a Nisei*.

For me, as an artist looking

back on her work, this is probably one of her first works where you see her play with her own subjectivity as a Japanese Canadian artist. You start to see more of herself come into the work and I think in a way it demonstrates how she was affected by the internment; and how at this time she felt okay talking about it or having the ideas or concepts crop up.

I'm going to read a quick passage from an interview with Xiao Ping Li. It's from this book called *Voices Rising Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (2007). Xiao Ping Li interviews Aiko and asks her, "You were very young when Japanese Canadians were evacuated, do you have many memories from those years?" and Aiko responds,

"I was only a few years old when the war broke [out] and was too young to understand the politics behind the evacuation of Japanese Canadians. The event's profound ramifications on our community would manifest themselves in later decades. My family was incarcerated in 2 camps, Slocan



and Kaslo. Many of the able-bodied men were placed in road camps working on government projects. Our father was separated from us for a number of years. In retrospect, what I find interesting about life in Slocan is that we were living in an essentially female society. Women were responsible for the well being of their children. They had to organize many activities to maintain their families and recreate a community. I recall they produced Japanese type crafts and did a lot of sewing. It would be very interesting to find some of the remaining Slocan women and find out more about their experiences during this period."

When I read that, I realized that the internment really did influence her practice. It even affected the textile work as well as the community-based work that she started to do at the time.

Also, in terms of her sculptural work, you start to see a lot of this concept of embodiment, or this idea that there are traces of the body within objects, that the objects carry the memory of certain people. For example, in this work *Reflections From the Garden* (DVD, "Remembering Aiko", @10:53), she's taken limbs of trees and branches from her garden and she's wrapped them with copper. She then installed them in the gallery space in a pool



Detail of "Homage to Nisei"



"Reflections from the Garden," (2003)

of water and there's a drip of water that falls into the pool. So I see the two works, *Homage to a Nisei* and this work as somehow related in the sense that there's a kind of care in the way she's bound and wrapped these objects, and re-created them in the gallery space. You still see the craft of the hand in the work - or you still feel it. There's also an audio element to it so you can feel that through the objects as well.

This next work was the last work she exhibited, and it was done in 2005. It's the only work I believe where you actually see her physically within the installation. The work was at A Space Gallery in Toronto and it is called *Bombard/Invade/Radiate*. (DVD, "In Conversation", 00:55-01:47), This piece is a highly autobiographical work as it explores her fight with metastatic breast cancer. Here she's playing with words and metaphors and it is probably the first time she's ever worked with words, in a more literal fashion. She's highlighting how the militaristic terms 'bombard,' 'invade' and 'radiate' are used on cancer patients, or the kind of language that is conjured up in the medical world when labeling the body with cancer. She's referring to Susan

Sontag's 1977 book, *Illness as Metaphor*. So what we're looking at are DVD loops on three screens that span about 10 ft X 48 ft, the three scans hang down and float in the gallery. This is a piece made in collaboration with Midi Onodera. Midi is a filmmaker and she filmed Aiko waving the flags.



"Bombard/Invade/Radiate" (2005) (DVD, "In Conversation", 00:55 - 01:47)



Aiko in "Bombard/Invade/Radiate," (2005)

In the work she's dressed in black, but the clothing starts to disappear as the 9-channel video projection starts to move and it begins to reveal her mastectomy, her scar. There's this subtle, slow peeling away as she's waving the flags. In the gallery space, along with that work are 3 white hollow posts, which I'll show you. (DVD, "In Conversation", 3:44-4:34). This is the part of the video when her black outfit is being peeled away. There are 3 white posts, and each of them has a sound piece embedded in it. If you walk up to the pillar and carefully listen you'll hear dialogue between Aiko and her doctor. Her doctor is speaking to her in this militaristic-like language about her condition. Apparently, it's so quiet that you have the feeling you are eavesdropping. So there's that piece, and she has another piece called *Witness*, which is an empty bomb casing. In it is a pool of water and a

projection of World War Two fighter planes zooming by. In this piece the text 'witness' pops up. It places the viewer in the perspective of a witness watching.

Below: This is a still of Aiko making the work and that's Midi Onodera in the background (DVD, "In Conversation", 6:43- 7:20). So as you can see, she continues to work collaboratively.





Above and below: "Estuary" (2009), by Grace Channer and Midi Onodera

I thought I'd end with a couple of images from Grace Channer's piece (above). These are stills from her animations that are downstairs which focus on Aiko's hands (DVD, "Estuary"). Grace Channer is an animator and she was interested in the idea that Aiko was expressive with her hands and used her hands a lot. She was someone that focused on this concept of labour, and tending to different kinds of communities, and different kinds of art practices and so the whole piece is surrounding those ideas.

