

Tape 8, Midi and Aiko Interview – Full Transcript

**A: = Aiko Suzuki**

**M: = Midi Onodera**

0:15:18:03

INT. Aiko's living room. Aiko looks at slides, talks about work.

(Slide: “**CANADADA**” Red and white, long pieces hanging)

A: ... and I think it was done in '70 or '71... These series of hangings were done in the seventies, yup. And I had developed a technique of laying down fibers one by one, and using wood dowels as a way to hold them together because I'm not a weaver type. But I think I these works sort of approach a more painterly technique, a more of a painterly style. The only parameters I had was colour and length. And the rest I just sculpted, cut with scissors, play around with angles, shapes and arrive at a final work. But again, it's all improvised. I really start these pieces with colour and size as limitations and then play around with the piece until I arrive at something.

M: So where does this fall in the chronology of your fiber work?

A: This was the very beginning. The early stages of fiber.

M: So maybe your third or fourth piece or...?

A: Yeah I'd say maybe about the tenth. Because it's like any artwork when you're experimenting with a new form it takes a while before you get your chops where things work and work well. So there are quite a few pieces that led up to this technique that I threw out.

M: What made you become interested in fiber as a medium in the first place?

A: That's a hard one. People keep asking me that. And to go from painting to fiber is quite a big jump but I have feeling it has to do with my work in theatre and creating dance sets which have to be three dimensional and I tended to use fabric and fibers in the set that drew me into working with fibers in a different style. And yet using painterly qualities as well. But I think it's the theatre work that really engaged me with these three dimensional pieces.

M: So then besides the theatre work was this the only time you approached something three-dimensional?

A: Yes.

M: Because...?

A: Because... Well actually, that's wrong because my first exhibition of hard edge paintings were on shaped canvases so already I think with the canvases I was fracturing a two dimensional form, splintering it and creating three dimensional works. Cause as I progressed with that first series the paintings, initially they were all round, they were all circular canvases, and then I started cutting them into pie shapes and buckling them, attaching so the canvases would stick out at odd angles so already I was breaking away from the flat surface, 2D. So combined with the dance, theatre experience this almost seemed like natural, to escape from the tyranny of 2D. To be able to explore 3D fiber seemed a good medium.

M: And what is that on top there?

A: On top there is vinyl.

M: Is that a maple leaf?

A: Yeah.

M: So does this have political significance?

A: It could, it was before free trade. (Laughs) Maybe it's a precursor to free trade. That's why it's called "Canadada" with the stars and the blue stripes. So it could be read that way. This piece is about 14 feet tall, so it's quite tall.

[Pan over to slide, CUT]

0:20:18:20

A: And this piece is called "**Georgia O.**" After I completed it, it reminded of Georgia O'Keefe's work, her iris series and flowers.

M: This one seems to be a lot more subtle in terms of the colour than the first one.

A: Yes, yes. You know it's fun to... I used to go to Jobbers and grab up whatever left overs he had gathered up and make use of whatever colours and materials he had. So I used to really enjoyed the aspect of hunting and searching for materials that would then inspire me. So these happened to be the colours that I grabbed up that day....

M: So is it all the same materials that you're using or...?

A: No, it varies from nylon to cotton to polypropylene. But primarily synthetics because synthetics colour fast and have a sheen which I like, rather than wool.

0:22:55:00

M: Okay, so the name of the piece again is...

A: Is "Hokusai Silvered". Now as I told you, titles always come last. And it reminded me of Hokusai's wave paintings. And that's why it has that name. And that was as minimal as I got with the hangings. It's quite pure. And I think gorgeous piece. And it was bought by, for the Queen's Silver Jubilee. It was in an exhibition that External Affairs organized so it went to her collection. (Laughs)

M: Wow...

A: Yeah.

M: And how did you feel about that?

A: Very good. I was very proud.

M: And are those aluminum bars?

A: No actually, it's paint.

M: Really. And what colours are on there?

A: It's just gradations of gray.

Now again it was an interesting process to just go to this wonderful Jobbers and see what he had. And make colour choices. It's like buying tubes of paint. And I decided to do a piece that was very minimal in colour and found the right tones of grey that just seemed to be perfect.

M: So how do you go about making something like this because this is obviously very different from the others in terms of the way its shaped, even the lack of colour, the monotone.

A: I just felt a need to make a very quiet introspective work and the grey colours just seemed to lead to that. But there wasn't anything planned at all other than the overall size of the work. So you're not... once I had laid down the fibers and looped the wood doweling on I would spend hours on a ladder playing with the poles. You know, shaping it until I arrived at shapes that seemed right for the piece. See the back pole I probably had it in front as well, the third set of poles, and why I looped it back and around, I don't know, it just worked.

M: So you start by putting the.. material onto the beams and you think I'm going to use two or three, I'm going to use two or three beams, then it's just whatever happens kind of thing...

A: Yes, yes. So actually I lay out the fibers... I had a table built so that the fibers would all be laid out on the table, which was very flat, you know, just two sections. So the fibers would be laid out flat, I would attach the poles and decide on what distance there would be between the poles, glue the poles on, and then cut it free. Now at that point I end up with just a straight curtain with three sets of dowels attached. Now what do I do with that? How do I shape it? And this is where the real creative process starts. Shaping it, getting form out of it. So it's not like sculpting and you sculpting away. You know I have already a form and I have to shape it within itself. Some of them work, some of them don't.

M: And how long does a process like this take?

A: It could take a few months. And there's a tremendous amount of walking and a lot of ladder work. Because they're all floating up in space so there's a lot of up and down. When you work 2D you're walking backwards and forwards, you're applying paint and stepping back to look. With this one you're going up and down and back so very physical work, which I found enjoyable.

M: I like that piece. It feels more organic or something.

A: Uh huh.

0:28:09:15

A: And this work was called "Green Peace". It's owned by the Winnipeg Art Gallery. And this was an accident. One of the poles fell. And as I walked back to take a look at it, it seemed right, it seemed absolutely right. I had been wrestling with this piece for a long time and it ... I called it Green Peace for obvious reasons, it looked like a boat. So that's the story

M: And what do you think about things like that? What do you think about happy accidents type things?

A: Oh I love them! I love them. It happens in everything that I do. And that is a sheer joy. It's like a jazz musician, you have a certain riff and you take off on a riff and you just go with it. And because my work is so unplanned being able to take advantage of these accidents and moving with them is part of the creative process. I love it.

M: Did it take you a while to accept happy accidents or was it natural flow for you?

A: It just seemed like a natural progression with ... you know because I'm from the abstract school, really that's my training, and I still consider myself an abstract artist. It all comes from that

training, to take advantage of accidents. When I was studying with Rick Gorman, I also studied with Matthew Teitelbaum. I used to get nosebleeds in his classes all the time, it was so intense, but that's where I learned how to take advantage of accidents. Learn when to stop. Learn how to use it. Or learn when it's over, when you can't do anything with it. If the accident is not useful, let it go.

[Pan to slide]

A: These are terrible slides. You know, I couldn't afford a photographer in those days.

0:30:37:05

A: This piece was bought by the art bank. It's called "Mishima Two" Orlon and nylon.

M: What's organ?

A: Did you know... they used to make sweaters and shirts out of Orlon? I guess they're the kind of shirt that men wear when they play golf.

M: So highly synthetic.

A: Yup. I guess you would call it raw orlon. And just attaching that one thin cluster of fibers helped me with the title. I also put two poles, two dowels hanging vertically which gave it an Asian sensibility, I thought. (Cringes) Hate to use that word, so that's why "Mishima Two."

M: So did you do the sculpture first and then put the dowels up?

A: Yeah, again, it needed something there. It needed something in that gap.

M: And why do you think it gives it an Asian sensibility to?

A: Just the colour for one thing. Some strange reason the red, black, grey... and the two dowels almost give the feeling of bamboo, if you clamp them together they make a bamboo sound also. And of course the red is just like bloodletting. If you think of Mishima doing his thing...

M: And what about the shape, is it kind of kimono-esque?

A: I guess so, when you look at it in retrospect. I never thought of that.

M: It seems a much more kimono-esque than the other pieces because you know how some people hang their kimonos on a bamboo pole on their wall.

A: Oh yeah. Interesting.

M: And I like the organic-ness of the white. The almost cobwebby...

A: Yeah, it needed that drape up there. That's what I love about process is that I start with the fibers and once I can't shape it any farther then, what does it need? So would be like a painter. Put some white paint on the top, drag it down. So it really is working quite spontaneously.

0:33:40:08

A: And this one I called "Homage to Curtis". It's very simple piece and it reminded me of Curtis' sepia photographs of Aboriginal people.

M: Curtis...

A: Edward Curtis the photographer, who took photos of Aboriginal people in the 1800s. And it looked like, well, obvious it's a teepee form. So just like "Hokusai Silvered" very muted colours. Very simple.

M: So this is a totally different form than the others. Did you start moving more into geometric?

A: No. This is an odd one. See I only had two dowels on this one so it was difficult... you can't really shape it without a third. And I played with this one quite a bit before I arrived at this resolution and I think it worked.

M: Do you say, okay, this piece I'm only going to make two dowels, this one I'm gonna use...

A: Yeah, you throw in these problems. What do you do with two dowels... how do you...

M: So how does it work for you when you do a piece? Ok, now I've done this so I can go this way, subtract this or what if I add that... is that the kind of way you work.

A: I think I wanted to see what I could do with only two sets of dowels and it is a problem because without the third element you can't really give a work shape. So how do you shape it if you only have two? It will be pretty bland just it hang it straight or just to hang one swag could be very uninteresting. It just didn't work with this piece. So just playing around with it. And trying to make it work. And if it doesn't work, fine, let it go.

[Pan to slide]

0:36:37:13

A: Now I have hung this piece so many different ways, it drove me crazy. Look at all the dowels. So many possibilities. And after doing a lot of ladder work it looked best just on the floor, as a floor piece. So it can even sit upright. Yeah I can just stand the poles on the floor and it drapes in an interesting way. There are just a lot of possibilities. I would like to see this piece used in a dance in theatre.

M: And where's this piece?

A: It's rolled up in storage.

M: How big is this piece?

A: I'd say about 15 feet long. Quite long. My table consisted of two, 2x10 boards and I could adjust them to any width I needed. So when I wrapped the fibers around it doubles the length. That's how I worked. This happened to be a very long piece. And that's why this one is narrow. I ran out of fibers. So it became a narrow piece.

M: So do you get the fibers a certain length...?

A: No they come in rolls. They use them in manufacturing carpet and things. So I would just go to the jobbers, see what they had, see what he had and just buy up a bunch of rolls.

M: So you tie them together...

A: No, no, there are no knots in these. They're not joined. If I ran out of a length I wouldn't join it, I'd just let that length go. And make sure it was under the board. So no knots or connections.

M: And is that a deliberate thing.

A: Yeah I think it would look pretty bad if it had a knot in it.

M: Overall, is that with all your pieces?

A: Yes, none of them have knots. It just seemed... Even putting the copper on the branches I have to fix some of them, the ends aren't finished. I think it's finished. It's just a quality. You know... Now maybe you're too young to know who Lester Williams was...

M: Oh I know Esther Williams.

A: This piece is called Esther Williams.

M: And were you a fan?

A: No it just looked like Esther. Diving. Swimming. So the tone is pretty playful. And this is a fairly simple, simple work. [Pan] There may be another view of this, I'm not sure.

[Change slide]

A: Yeah that's the second view. That was my studio on Mowat.

M: Nice studio.

0:41:30:26

A: And this piece is called "Mara's mom" You know I've been waiting to start work on the library piece which was taking forever to get going. I had to fundraise for it. And I already had the fibers in the studio so I just experimented and created a work using the fibers I was going to use for the library piece. And this work toured internationally with a group show organized by External Affairs and was very successful. It's quite big, hangs about ten feet up. Diaphanous and simple and elegant.

M: And this one was done after the Esther one.

A: Yes. This was done especially for the touring show. And I think Monica writes about this in the catalogue. [Change slide] That's just a detail.

M: That's nice.

A: It's beautiful.

M: So it's part of their collection?

A: Yes.

M: You've got a lot of collections.

A: Well, I mean, five museums... So this is right after the floor piece. And I thought it'd be interesting to fracture the lines, the dowels instead of having the straight dowels and it didn't hang well so I ended up using it as a floor piece. It can be installed many different ways. I call it "Utamaro Floored," you know the Japanese printmaker, the block printmaker. Cause the colours seemed very much like his prints, you know the women in the kimonos, very similar.

M: And what about the blues up there...

A: That's Esther. (Laughs)...That's part of my table.

[Pan to slide]

A: Yeah, it was big enough to mock up the library piece to size, to the exact size.

M: Wow... So around this time you were working in fiber were there a lot of other artists working in fiber?

A: Yes there were. Yeah. That's why that exhibition, the one that External Affairs organized came about because there was a lot of activity, a lot of experimentation. Now I was asked to do an installation for Harbour Front's show in December, they were calling White Art. And all artist were to do a work in white. So it was quite an interesting show. All fiber artists. So every items in the show was white. So I called this one "Snow Drifts". And it was a walk-through. So everyone had to walk through it to get into the gallery. This is going to be similar to the piece I'm hanging up in the show. Same fiber. So this led me to do larger and larger works, which is wonderful, like full installation. Creating an atmosphere in a space.

M: And this piece, since you say was a show about white and light. Did it make you think more about the use of light in your work or were you always conscious of that...?

A: I think for these kinds of works, the larger you get the more the lighting becomes more critical. It's not just a spot light on something. But you need it for ambience to create atmosphere. It becomes a very important element in the work. The installations all have to be... The lighting becomes just as critical as the work itself.

M: And how is the fiber community? Is it still around, are people...?

A: It is, people are still doing it, but we experimenters, you don't see as much. Because I think the market dropped out of fiber commissions. People went back to painting, you know the market was very popular and successful in the seventies, a lot of commissions but that just dropped out. And I think that's part of the reason there just isn't as much happening in the fiber medium.

M: Were there a lot of women involved?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah.. I'd say there were two men out of the 15 that I knew there were two men.

M: Why do you think?

A: It's the medium.

It's like embroidery, it's like quilting. It's women's medium. Ceramics... I guess there a lot of men in ceramics but still the majority are women. These seem to be women's tools. You know Judy Chicago when she had her groundbreaking exhibition had a lot of women working together on her show using a women's material. Joyce Weiland also. Her sister quilted with her. Did the quilting for her. And these are feminine materials, what are considered feminine materials.

M: And were you conscious of that...

A: Nope, no. But when I think about it, my mother taught us how to embroider when we were young so I used to love embroidery. Knitting, I used to love to knit. My brother never used to do any of these things but we did and it was very enjoyable. Did you knit?

M: I wasn't very good. I think I did a scarf once.

A: So you know maybe that's why I felt very comfortable with this medium. Because it's slow, it's methodical. The process just seemed right for me. That's a terrible statement. [Gets up for food] Help yourself...

[Pan to slide]

A: Can't even see the colours. ... This was the very last fiber hanging I did. It was a full installation for the Burnaby Art Center and I called it Stanley Park Rink for obvious reasons. It's a really beautiful work.

M: And... it looks like green?

A: Yeah, shades of green and navy. And just having the fiber lay in pools, just letting them sit in pools was a nice effect and it was a complete walk-through. Now I was hoping to get a grant to motorize the piece... go through cycles. It's really interesting because you know when I had it at the studio and I was packaging it, removing it, letting the hanging drop to the floor, the motion was so beautiful cause the fibers would just fall in waves. So I thought it'd be fascinating to motorize each point so that it would slowly change and not just lower the whole thing but have certain angles happening through very slow cycles. But it was too expensive and I couldn't get a grant for it. But this was the very last pike of fiber work I did. I couldn't work small. The pieces seemed to get larger and larger.

M: So why... When you were making it did you know this would be your last piece?

A: No, soon afterwards I developed severe arthritis and I mean this work is extremely physical.

M: And so what year was this in? 70s?

A: 78... or maybe early eighties, I think.

M: And do you miss doing work like this?

A: No, I've moved forward. But even if it wasn't for the arthritis, who knows. I may have reached... Because if you don't sell them, if they don't get into collections you end up storing them. And what's the point?

M: Beautiful colours.

A: Yeah. And this is lit very badly. We just lit it for the photograph. But the lighting in the exhibition itself is gorgeous.

M: It's a lot of material.

A: Yup.

M: This is the photograph.

A: Yeah, this is the piece we're going to be hanging. It's gonna be a lot of work.

0:54:04:00

M: So what is this piece?

A: This is using the leftovers from the library commission. And I just was interested in seeing how it would look hanging in a straight row. No angles, just straight. The only difference is the height factor.



M: Does this have a name?

A: No.

M: How long did it take you to hang this one?

A: Took me a few days. I've always had good ladders. [Looking at another slide?] Oh. That's an old one.... Upside down.

M: Is that right?

A: Yup.

0:55:46:00

A: Yeah this ones' called "River." It's two pieces. And there's unsung Orlon. No it's unspun Nylon plus Orlon. So I did this the same time I did the Mishima pike. I had enough fibers to do a second one.

M: Did you approach it in a similar way you did the Mishima piece?

A: Yeah except I did two separate pieces and I wasn't sure how they were gonna hang and after a lot of playing round I decided the second panel would just sit on the floor as part of it.

M: Do you think that this one is also an Asian feel to it?

A: Yeah, I think so. Do you?

M: I think it's the colours.

A: You know, its interesting, Spanish painters colours are very similar to Japanese. What I would think is sort of Japanese. Ochre, black, sienna. My favorite painter in the world Tapias uses these colours and they're very similar to Japanese, what I would think Japanese sensibility is, colour. Funny.

Oh we don't need to look at all of these. They're just preparing the studio for the library piece.

M: So what are you doing here?

A: I'm just masking the exact shape of the pool (?) a the library. I did these for a high school presentation, just showing them how an artist works in a studio. A Japanese guy actually did the wood for me. Whittled them.

M: This is all the same piece?

A: Yeah this is the library piece. This is one of the tables, I had two tables. Making sure there are no loose ones. It had to be flame proofed and scotch guarded.

M: So is that what gives it a kind of coating?

A: Yeah they need it. In a public place you need it to be flame proofed and scotch guard everything. Fibers you need to scotch guard... these I'm getting ready to move to the library so there are a lot of panels.

M: Reminds me of a scene out of Norma-something. Sally Fields movie when she was a seamstress in the factory...

A: ...Norma Ray.

M: Just looks like you're in sort of big factory as a worker or something.

A: I was!

A: Rolling them up.

M: Did you work by yourself?

A: No I had a couple of people working with me. So they're all packaged and ready to go.  
(Laughs)

And this is it.

Yup.

M; How long did it take you to install this piece?

A: A few days. I had pretty good architectural drawings. Cause I needed the grid on the ceiling also.

M: And what do you think of this piece now?

A: They haven't kept it up.

M: Yeah but besides that...

A: Oh, I think it was pretty successful. It's just unfortunate they don't have the funds to maintain it. But as it is it only had to be guaranteed for eight years. So after eight years they, if they want to remove it they could. But the opening night I had the water drained and the Toronto Dance Theater, David Earle choreographed a work so the dancers were all in the pool area. And a friend of mine, a composer let us use one of his pieces. So there was a performance in the pool at the unveiling and as soon as the dancers left we turned the fountain on and water started coming... it was great. But see that air vent? There was so much dirt coming down from all of these. Imagine what their books are like.

M: So was this the biggest commission that you had. So how did you feel about it? Were you scared?

A: Oh it was wonderful, it was...

CUT.