

Tributaries: Reflections of Aiko Suzuki

by John Endo Greenaway · July 29, 2010



Photo by Kaz Ehara

Aiko Suzuki was a remarkable and prolific visual artist, known and loved in Toronto. Although she was born in Vancouver, until now she has only had one exhibition of her work on the coast (in 1984 at the Burnaby Art Gallery). When Midi Onodera contacted the Japanese Canadian National Museum in Burnaby, BC to suggest showing her DVD project on Aiko, it seemed the perfect opportunity to showcase this important Japanese Canadian artist.

Aiko Suzuki (1937-2005) was born in Vancouver, and was interned with her family in the Slocan region before moving to Ontario. For 25 years, she was a mentor to many artists, and was involved in arts education with countless students throughout Toronto. In 1994, Aiko was a founder of the Gendai Gallery in Toronto —dedicated to contemporary art by Asian artists. She received numerous awards for her contributions, and in 2005, she was elected to membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. In her final work, *Bombard/Invade/Radiate* she used video, audio and photography and turned the camera onto herself to produce a bold and intimate reflection on her experiences with breast cancer. Aiko Suzuki lost her battle with cancer on December 31, 2005.

Getting to “know” Aiko through this project makes me really wish I could have known her in person. By all accounts she was a dynamo—an energetic and intriguing person who was intensely creative and a lot of fun. Aiko was known for creating minimalist yet stunning dance sets, and she was an early proponent of collaboration, using sound in some of her early pieces, and often including jazz, contemporary music, poetry and dance at her openings.



Aiko Suzuki, *Bourrée*, 1985. Watercolour and india ink on paper.

Aiko was constantly searching for new materials, and worked in a wide variety of media, ranging from monumental textiles, to acrylic, oils, and monoprints. This exhibit pays tribute to Suzuki's life and work through a display of some of her original work and three multimedia installations by writer Joy Kogawa, composer Ann Southam, and visual artist Grace Channer, who were each inspired by Suzuki and worked in collaboration with Toronto filmmaker Midi Onodera. Midi consciously chose this "fragmented" non-linear approach, feeling it was impossible to capture the energy and vitality of Aiko in a more traditional film documentary.

Visitors to the exhibit are immediately welcomed with Aiko's monumental hanging fibre work, entitled *Lyra Refrain*, 1984. *Lyra Refrain* has a unique form, but echoes the huge sculpture called *Lyra* that Aiko created in 1981 for the main lobby of the Metro Toronto Reference Library. In one of her interviews, Aiko explained that "Each suspension was created by laying down the fibres one by one, then securing them with wooden dowels. Each piece took several months to complete—there was a lot of walking and ladder work—they were very physical."

The other works in the exhibit illustrate the diversity of Aiko's practice. She was sometimes criticized for switching mediums so often, but she explained that she was drawn to use the medium that best suited her inspiration. From huge brightly coloured oil paintings to dramatic swooping india ink works, Aiko's work is deceptively minimalist—in fact, she fills the space with movement and energy.

One of her few non-abstract works is the charcoal diptych, *The Package*, 1990. She says: "My father sent me some bamboo from his garden. He stitched burlap pieces together and used found string and made rope out of it. I loved the rope—all tied together—lots of knots. The parcel was so beautiful, I couldn't open it. The package was a statement of love, and I did a lot of sketches of just the package—all large scale. I needed to do it big."

The three DVD works developed by Midi Onodera reflect varying approaches from artists who knew Aiko well and were inspired by her in different ways.

Ann Southam is an acclaimed Canadian composer who first met Aiko when they worked together for the Toronto Dance Theatre: Ann was composing music and Aiko was creating sets. They collaborated often over the years and became close friends. For this piece, Ann created an exquisite minimalist piano work inspired by Aiko's painting Spatial View of Pond. Midi paired this music with film footage of two other works by Aiko. In the gallery, the film is shown in a black box, with a reflecting pool in front of the screen. The viewer is mesmerised by layers of reflections and richness of sound.

The second piece in the DVD is a video poem, written by acclaimed author Joy Kogawa in homage to Aiko. Joy was born in Vancouver in 1935 and during WWII, Joy and Aiko knew each other slightly when they lived in the same internment camp in Slocan. The poem, Portrait of the Artist as a Donkey, highlights aspects of Aiko's personality: her "stone" quality and resilience. Midi matched the poem with shifting, split screen imagery taking the viewer between the busy movements of an urban landscape and the graceful textures of nature. Aiko's daughter, Chiyoko Szlavnic, a composer now based in Berlin, created the accompanying soundscape.

The final work focuses on Aiko's hands, their energy, their fluidity and the connective imagery they evoke. Grace Channer is a Toronto-based artist and animator who shared a studio with Aiko for some time, and was greatly inspired by her. In Estuary, she employed digital animation techniques with music, again by Chiyoko Szlavnic. An estuary is a transition zone where fresh water from streams mingles with the salt water of the ocean. In the same way, Grace states, Aiko was the one who created these tributaries that led to different places... she had the capacity to bring communities together.

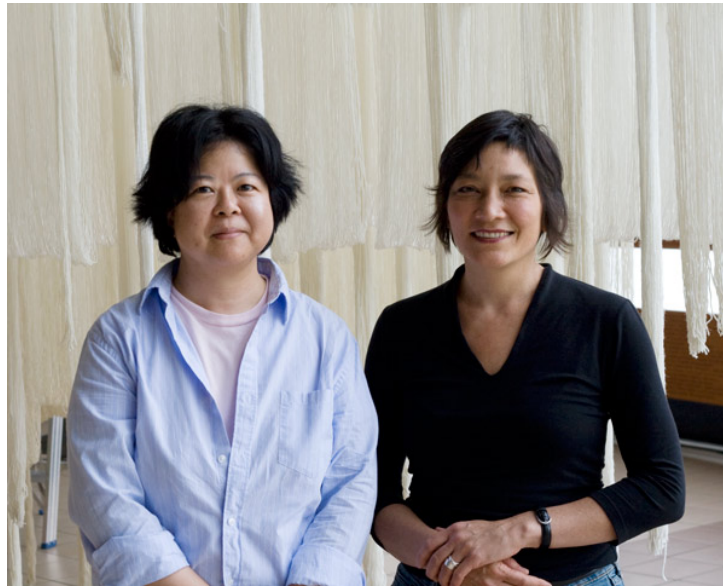
Tributaries: Reflections of Aiko Suzuki runs through to August 28 at the Japanese Canadian National Museum, 6688 Southoaks Crescent, Burnaby, BC.

Copies of the DVD Tributaries: Reflections of Aiko Suzuki are available for sale in the Museum shop.

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by Beth Carter

Conversation Piece



Midi Onodera and Chiyoko Szlavnic

I'm standing in the main gallery of the Japanese Canadian National Museum in Burnaby. Packing materials are strewn about; a few paintings are mounted on the wall already, others lay on tables or against walls. In various parts of the gallery, staff and volunteers are busy assembling viewing stations and booths. Out in the lobby, an enormous fibre sculpture hangs suspended from the ceiling, transforming the space with its gentle presence.

The works are by Aiko Suzuki, the Toronto-based artist who passed away in 2005. With me are filmmaker Midi Onodera, musician/composer Chiyoko Szlavnic, and JCNM Director-Curator Beth Carter. Tributaries: Reflections of Aiko Suzuki, the new exhibit the three are in the process of mounting, is in some respects a posthumous introduction to those of us on the west coast that know little or nothing about the life or work of this seminal Canadian artist.

Chiyoko, Aiko's daughter, has travelled from Germany, where she lives, to help mount the exhibit and to take part in the opening reception here on June 29. As executor of Aiko's estate she loaned a number of her mother's works to the Museum for the exhibit.

Midi, an award-winning filmmaker for over twenty years, has flown in from Toronto to oversee the exhibit. Her recently-completed DVD, also titled Tributaries: Reflections of Aiko Suzuki, forms the basis for the exhibit.

Over the course of an hour we walk through the gallery, looking at the various works and talking about the exhibit. The discussion ranges from the DVD to the

east-west divide within the Canadian Nikkei community, to Japanese Canadians in the arts, and of course Aiko Suzuki herself.

by John Endo Greenaway

Following are edited excerpts from our conversation.

Chiyoko Szlavnic and Midi Onodera w/ Beth Carter

John Endo Greenaway Going through this DVD, it isn't a documentary as such, is it...?

Midi Onodera I didn't want the DVD to be simply a documentary about Aiko because number one, I never felt that Aiko was a linear kind of spirit. I felt that she was kind of like all over, but in a really organized way. She had an incredible energy to her that wasn't linear, And I'm also not a linear thinker in my work, and I'm not a documentary filmmaker, so I felt like this DVD, conceptually, was the best way to articulate what she was about or what her spirit was in a way, and then to have those other artists translate their feelings about her or her work just abstracts it more, and so it's not just simply a memorial about the artist.

Chiyoko Szlavnic And what's nice is that each of the three artists and you were very close to Aiko, so the pieces really do reflect something of her, of her spirit.

MO And at different points of her life, too. I only got to know Aiko close up, you know, only a few years before she died, really. So we're also reflecting different periods, I think, in Aiko's life.

Basically I found out that Aiko had cancer and I thought oh my God, I have to do this now, or else there's not going to be the opportunity. So I remember I called her up and I said let's have lunch, and she was a bit suspicious about my intentions. I said I want to start shooting you. I told her, I don't know what it will be, but I want to do it, and in exchange I will help you with your show, because she had a retrospective up at Gendai Gallery, and so she had to get from downtown to Gendai all the time, and I had a car, so that was it. It was an exchange, because that's kind of the way Aiko worked. So I really got to know her driving up, all those times to Gendai and shooting a lot of footage of her preparing for her show.

The main reason that I wanted to do this DVD is for educational use, because I feel that there aren't enough works by senior contemporary Canadian artists to begin with, but there are even fewer about Japanese Canadians, and we're at the point in our culture where we are losing some of the more senior members. So what does

that mean for the preservation of our own culture in Canada? It's a history that I think needs to be recorded somehow. So I received some Canada Council funding to produce a DVD. It's a non-linear DVD that is somewhat fragmented, there are many different elements to it.

I guess the entire DVD has quite a strong feminist framework as well, because they all talk about feminism, and then there are interviews with the contributors, and Chiyoko's on there too because she contributed the sound to Grace's piece, and we worked together on the Donkey piece.

A section that you might find interesting is a conversation that Aiko and Kerri Sakamoto and myself had, mostly talking about her last installation piece, which was a bit of a departure for Aiko, wouldn't you say?

CS Mm hmm. She created some video installations. Midi worked on the project with her, she was basically addressing her experiences with cancer.

MO This was her last installation, Bombard/Invade/Radiate.

CS This video installation was inspired by Susan Sontag's writing about cancer, the terminology and language that's used, how war terminology is used by oncologists when talking about cancer and treatments. Aiko then relates this to the second world war, pointing out the irony in the fact that the chemotherapy she was receiving, you know, contained mustard gas and other chemicals that are, or were used in warfare. So that's what the whole exhibition was about, and I think that was her way of processing and coming to terms with the disease, her own involvement in it, and the victimization one feels as a cancer patient: you're out of control of your body, and the medical system is basically controlling you. One video installation showed bomber planes dropping bombs during the Second World War, with the single word, "Witness," flashing on the screen. That was also about her whole cancer process, and struggle--her battle with cancer. She was never literal like this in her work previously, it's the only non-abstract piece I know. I think she really wanted to bring these kinds of messages across. That was also the idea of using semaphore for the words "Bombard.Invade.Radiate." as well—like signalling from a ship at sea to try to get the message across with words, but in an abstracted way.

She also did a series of new works about three months before she died, a whole new series of these incredibly gorgeous, intense, rich collage and paint combinations, five in total. Some were triptychs, some were in five pieces, some were ten. But it was just phenomenal, she was so ill and had so many side effects and stuff, it's amazing that she just put out a table in her backyard that summer, and created this additional series.

MO And Chiyoko did these . . . what would you call them?

CS Aiko called them “listening posts”. She wanted to have some recordings of visits with her oncologist in the exhibition, so she created these “listening posts” where you could more or less eavesdrop on very intimate conversations about her cancer, its diagnosis, and its treatment.

MO So there’s that conversation, and then there is this 30-minute piece, which is Aiko talking about her work. We basically went through a bunch of slides with her and she just answered questions about her work. And then the last part is myself talking about my feelings about Aiko, the project, and things like that.

JEG Did she feel a need to document her art and her life, do you think?

MO I don’t think so. I think that she just got used to having me hanging around. We talked about art a lot and since there are so few Japanese Canadian women artists, it was a great opportunity for me, to get to know her, someone I had so much respect and admiration for.

CS She was very good at documenting her work and being very organized about getting professional photographers in to document it, and so on, but I think she was more interested in creating art than creating a career, so she put all her energy into the artworks and documenting them . . .

JEG The mediums she was working in were so diverse. As opposed to, say, a poet, where everything can be contained in a collection, this seems more ephemeral in a sense . . .

MO Oh, yeah. You can see from the wide range of her work. She was not an artist who was limited by her choice of media at all. Aiko did a series of works based on the bamboo wrapped in burlap . . . the package was sent to her from her father, who was in Vancouver. So in a way, this has traveled to Toronto, and now it’s back here. Aiko talks about that story in the DVD, doesn’t she? She talks about that package and what that meant, and you know, just a bit of her relationship with her father, and then the creation of these art works.

And then there’s an essay by Cindy Mochizuki, you can download a PDF, and there is also another essay on my website by Kyo Maclear that was commissioned. So really it’s designed so that, for instance, if you were involved in new music you might look at the Ann Southam piece, if you’re interested in Aiko alone, you might just look at the Aiko section, look at how her earlier work developed and progressed through the years. You know, there’s a number of ways to sort of access the material. So it’s not structured like a feature, where you just throw it in and it’s like a passive viewing experience. That’s why I call it a fragmented narrative.

Beth Carter If you watch the whole thing, all the different sections, it really, really works. Like I started just going through the Aiko early works, because I wanted to

know more about her actual art work, and that's precious, to have her talking about her work documented that way and you get such a good sense of her, and how she expresses herself.

CS Yes, the interview segments are really fabulous. You get a sense of her personality, also through all the recollections, memories, and so forth.

BC And then when you put together the artists, all these different approaches, how inspired they were to create something else because of Aiko, the meaning she had for them as artists, and being in the community. I think it's brilliant.

JEG I'm glad to see Aiko's work coming to the West Coast, too, because you know there's such this great divide between Toronto and Vancouver basically. We know nothing about what's going on out there . . . it's three thousand miles but it sometimes feel like a million . . .

CS A relative told me a very compelling story last night about how that divide might have begun. After the war, BC refused to allow Japanese Canadians to stay in this province. And so a number of people signed up to go back to Japan, but apparently the first ones who did go sent messages back to Canada saying, "Don't come, don't come, it's horrible here, there's no food, we're starving!" etc. And then a bunch of people got the BC ruling overturned after the political atmosphere settled down, and ended up staying in BC after all, while some families, including mine, had already moved east. Could that have played a part in the division, besides the geographical distance? It's an interesting anecdote, because I wasn't even aware of it, and you talking about this difference, your bringing it up now . . . it could have deep-rooted reasons. In any case, it's very complex.

BC I was really interested that Midi contacted us and offered, you know, the opportunity to do the show, and I thought it was great for that reason, you know that we want to build bridges, we want to be pulling community together, and I just didn't think that Aiko was well enough known here on the coast.

JEG We have our little world here, our little pond. People from the east come through, but it always feels so fleeting . . .

CS But she knew Roy Kiyooka and Tamio Wakayama . . .

JEG Perhaps within the artist world there's more cross-pollinization, but otherwise . . .

The conversation turned to Roy Kiyooka and Japanese Canadian artists in general . . .

MO Well, I think also too, though, it's the fact that there were just so few artists of that generation, period. You know, so I think that the overall reception wasn't that

strong from the mainstream community itself. You know, they wanted to have their children become doctors and lawyers, not bankrupt artists who were living hand to mouth. I mean, even for me, my parents want me to become something like that as opposed to an artist because it's that thing that they felt they missed because of the war, because of being interned.

CS It's interesting because I think also for Aiko's generation, there was a very difficult personal struggle with identity because of the war and post-war experiences. I think redress was extremely important in bringing the community together again, and right at that time of redress, significant people in Toronto suddenly came together. There was a kind of political momentum, and it gave people a sense of empowerment, I think, and new connections were made within the community that might not have existed before because of the war, and post-war experiences.

MO But also, as we all know, redress wasn't a black and white thing. There were still people who were, like, no way, you know, and people who were, yes, absolutely, and you could see those tensions and frictions throughout and I think that was probably the most dramatic moment, besides the internment in our history.

JEG Yeah, in one sense it was pulling the community together, in other ways it was driving another wedge . . .

MO Yeah, exactly. It was like another, you know

JEG Line to cross?

MO Yes, exactly.

JEG It's interesting, Chiyoko, you were talking about the rift developing because of people going back to Japan and so forth. I've also heard that the people who went east were so bitter about the way they were treated by BC that they swore they would never step foot in BC again . . .

CS My grandfather was extremely bitter about how they had been treated, but he moved back to Vancouver when he retired. He loved it here.

BC I think Aiko speaks herself too about her relationship to being Japanese Canadian and whether she . . . I mean she basically says she didn't link herself with that in her art practice. But then through the course of discussing her art work, she's, oh this one's very Japanese and this one . . . you know, she's pointing out that.

MO I was asking her about how she named her work, you know, Hokusai's Dream or something, and she said, I couldn't name it McCaffey's Dream or something. So what does that mean? What are all those connections all about? So you know, hopefully

that is a marker of some kind for the younger generation to see that those discussions happened or to see what relevance it is in their own lives and their own identity. I think that having this discussion framed in an art context makes it a bit safer, it's not about you personally. It's distanced.

I hope that the DVD will encourage other artists not just Japanese Canadian artists, but other women artists, other emerging artists to have this kind of document, to see what other contemporary Canadian artists have been doing for the last what, how many years, you know.

CS It's fabulous that you started this project before she died, because you were able to gather a lot of interviews. I wonder whether a video was ever made about Roy [Kiyooka]. . .

JEG The thing is, Roy died suddenly, so in a way it kind of negated any chance of that.

MO But then again it comes back Chiyoko as well and her role in the preservation of Aiko's work . . .

CS But it helps when there are more people working who are interested because to have all the responsibility yourself--what do you do with that?--it's just overwhelming. Especially since I live in Germany, it's more difficult when all the art work is in Toronto and I live over there in Germany. It would be fabulous to commission essays and publish a really great art catalogue with all her work in high quality photographs. But such a project is pretty much impossible to organize from afar.

BC What comes across to me is how collaborative she was. I know she did the works herself but she was really inspired by music, by dance, by other artists, and did a lot of teaching and educating. It seemed to me that even though she was really focussed on her art work she also carried with it the spirit of collaboration all the time.

CS Yeah, she didn't always like to be just by herself in her studio.

JEG So do you think—I mean it's probably obvious—did the knowledge of her own mortality shift her focus, do you think?

CS I think after she discovered she had cancer, she tried to learn as much about it as she could. She did her own research, to really be engaged in the process as it was happening, so that she could make informed decisions. So I think her life became occupied by those things, and that's probably why it came out in her work. She was definitely consciously working through it, and yes, in her last exhibition, she really needed to process it--to bring her inner world, all of that which was occupying her, out into the world.

JEG It sounds like she was an artist right to the end?

MO Oh, absolutely.

CS In fact, even while she was dying, she exclaimed, “But I have to organize the exhibition, otherwise it won’t happen!” She wanted to organize an exhibition for her last series of works, the ones she had made the past summer. She was still calling galleries in December, the month she died, trying to find a venue for the works. And at some point she really was dying, and said, “But I need to organize this exhibition!” She was basically saying that she couldn’t die because then the works would never be shown. (laughs) Physically, the disease and chemotherapy are so debilitating. She didn’t have that much energy in the final year, but when she did get it back, what she did with it was create more projects.

MO Oh yeah for sure. At points during the production of her Bombard/Invade/Radiate piece, I could see that it was very hard on her. I know It was very hard just to be out in the sun and physically working, take after take after take. We had several cameras set up so she wouldn’t have to do as many takes but it’s just the nature of production, so it was very intense at that time. And then we had to go back a second time because we didn’t quite get enough footage, so I know that it was difficult, but she was absolutely determined to do it. There was no way that you could talk her out of it . . .