

Tape 8, Midi and Aiko Interview – Transcript, Edited

A: = Aiko Suzuki

M: = Midi Onodera

A: 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 ... 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.

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.

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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. 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 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.

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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.

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

A: ..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 it?

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...

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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.

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 to 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]

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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.

A: 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. 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.

A: 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 "Utumaro 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.

A: 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.

A: 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.

A: 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 do you miss doing work like this?

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?

A: 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.

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. I'm getting ready to move to the library so there are a lot of identifying points and panels.

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)

A: And this is it.

A: Yup.

A: 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.

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...It gave me a whole year to work in the studio on the piece without having to worry about studio rent, material. That's heaven for an artist. So for me that year was sheer joy. Going in and working on this piece, slowly constructing it; Looking forward to the day when it would be completed. It was wonderful. Highly recommended.

A: This is a series of fiberglass pieces. Again I was using fabric, using fiberglass cloth. The exciting thing about this material is you have a time constraint. Because once you mix the fiberglass and the elements together, I think you have about 15-20 minutes before it would harden. So again it's a lot of improvisation going on.

M: How did you get into this material?

A: I saw some cloth at Canadian Tire, and it was beautiful material. Absolutely beautiful. And they have three textures, different grades—heavy, medium, light-weight . And I started playing around with the material figuring out how to use them. And maybe create work, artwork out of them. So I just bought up stuff and started experimenting.

M: Was the cloth fiberglass?

A: Yes. It more or less—when you put the resin on it, it more or less melts the cloth and it all seals together. They use it for boat repairing, car repairing. Very powerful stuff. The fumes are incredibly toxic, I was crazy.

M: You didn't have a ventilation system?

A: No. Nope.

This one is called Kikiru's Thought. Kikiru was a Japanese poet.

M: So you do name many of your pieces in Japanese, even though they're people's names. And yet you don't really...

A: Identify...no, I know. Mind you, when I had an exhibition in Merton Gallery all the titles were named after Greek Gods. But you know a Greek name on this wouldn't work. Maybe as you say, I stereotype Japanese. And to me this feels like Japanese from a Japanese Canadian's point of view.

M: What is it that does?

A: The pole, the simplicity. The knot with the rope. Am I stereotyping what Japanese is, I probably am. I should ask ... (you know, post war immigrants) it would be interesting to hear their feedback.

M: How long did you work in fiberglass?

A: You know I would do projects, you know just do a series, and then go back to it again; Do another series. And when I moved into my last studio I had, I was working on a series and complaints came in like crazy. The smell. I realized, this is crazy working with this material. But it was great while I did it. I enjoyed it tremendously.

This is a pastel work. I started a charcoal series. My father had sent me some bamboo from his garden in Vancouver. And the package itself was made up of fabrics that...well, you know how your parents also don't throw anything out, and well, he had stitched these burlap pieces together to wrap the bamboo in. And he had all this found string, he had saved string, and he made a rope out of it and combined all these pieces together; He had a big ball at home. And when I received the parcel it was so beautiful I couldn't open it. And it was never ever to say that he honored or respected anything I did as an artist, but to me the package was a statement of love. That he created this beautiful package for me to use in my artwork. Later on I thought what this bugger did was he wanted to make sure his bamboo was well protected. But anyway, I couldn't open the package for a long time. I did a lot of sketches of just the package and the rope. By this one I had slightly opened the top and started doing a series of drawings. And this are all large scale. This one was about 6 feet tall.

M: So was this after the fiber, after you stopped doing fiber? So would you say that you sort of did that you worked in fabric and stopped that, then worked in fiberglass and stopped that, and then worked in something else.

A; Yes.

M: So you never mixed?

A: Yes, that's my problem I always go from one medium from another. I just totally get immersed in that medium until I feel it's done. That's it. And then move forward and explore another medium. So in a lot of ways it's a good idea but that's the way I am.

M: Why do you say that?

A: Well, especially in galleries they really like to see an artist be consistent in the medium that they use. And to continue to take that medium forward as far as you can and to keep expressing yourself in that medium. But I tend to just go all over the place.

M: But you're talking about a sort of external notion of art and what art and artists should do. Versus what you feel..

A: And I'm glad I'm not constrained by the gallery, who comes to expect, and even demand certain things of artists. It sort of locks them into a certain mode of expression. A lot of them do give into what the gallery wants because the buyer wants to collect a certain painting of the artist's.

M: Does changing the medium have anything to do with what's going on in your own life?

A: I don't think so. It's whatever inspires me; What medium can I best use to interpret that. What medium is the best medium to interpret the feeling I have for the package of bamboo. And drawing seemed the right medium. To draw it; and so this is a pretty abstracted drawing of the package. Once I started opening the package all these drawings came out and it just seemed—I didn't think about it. I just did it. Went out and bought paper and bought charcoal and just went at it. And this piece is about 6.5 ft, they're really large scale. I wanted to do it big, I needed it large and big. I don't know what drives me in that respect. I just go get the stuff and do it.

M: This is the one you were talking about earlier?

A: Yes, I really like it.

M: When you say you really like a piece, why, what makes you say that?

A: I think the black and white works really well with the painted side panels. Even though it's a drawing, the side panels have a feeling of bamboo thickets because bamboo's green. And the side panels give an atmosphere of what is contained in the package should they be alive. So the graphics really are pretty strong, but as a triptych they really enhance each other. The package I loved. I loved that rope. He worked so hard on that rope. Just tied together lots of knots.

M: When you did these works did you think about your father?

A: Oh yes. And it's interesting how in later life we come to honor the memories of our parents. And have memories that we had completely forgotten. Memories that come alive. Or just small little acts.

CREDITS.