

Grand Gestures and ‘Little Hooks’: Aiko Suzuki’s ‘Suspensions’ and Other Works

Sifting through 35 years of Aiko Suzuki’s exhibition reviews, one can immediately discern particularities about her artistic practice. Alongside many of the reviews, Suzuki is pictured in her studio or a gallery, gesturing to her enormous textile fibre works suspended in mid-air. In the most remarkable of these, Suzuki’s arms are outstretched in a V (echoing the neckline of her mod 1970s shirt and the drape of its wing-like sleeves), extended hands meeting the tented angles of a dark fibre hanging, eyes cast skyward. In another, she seems to be fingering a textile harp. Elsewhere, Suzuki sits enveloped by *Lyra*, her enormous fabric sculpture commissioned for the Metro Toronto Reference Library where it still hangs today; it is perhaps the most publicly-viewed work of her entire oeuvre. A photograph of *Lyra*’s unveiling in 1981 shows dancers surrounded by her majestic aerial sculptures: members of Toronto Dance Theatre performed in the library lobby’s emptied fountain pool at Suzuki’s request. These images convey the sense of embodiment—the suggestion of bodily presence—that characterizes Suzuki’s work, her approach to making it, and her impulse to invest it with a multi-disciplinary fullness of experience for the viewer.

An article appearing in a 1985 issue of *Canadian Art* aptly captures this aura of dynamic, living, yet rarefied corporeality. The reviewer writes of Suzuki’s set design for the National Ballet of Canada’s production of *Realm*, choreographed by David Earle: “Her diaphanous sweeps of translucent fabric or, more frequently, shimmering synthetics, embody expressive waves of light as monumental and yet as delicate as Hokusai breakers.”¹

Recently, Kerri Sakamoto and I engaged in a conversation with Aiko Suzuki in her living room. This was a rich treat: a spontaneous oral history that only such intimate face-to-face encounters afford.² Our conversation points to gaps in the written record, flags its partiality of perspective. A review in the *Globe and Mail*, for instance, offers the retrospective reader but a glimpse into Suzuki’s remarkably long-sustained practice. In 1967 Kay Kritzwiser reviewed Suzuki’s first exhibition of abstract paintings at the Pollock Gallery. Kritzwiser commented at the time on Suzuki’s audacious decision to incorporate a sound element into the show, writing that in the painting series, *Release*, “Instead of heart thumps, meant to emphasize the titanic struggle of man breaking out of his environment, the sound is merely a distraction”.³ Musing on the novelty of combining painting with a sound element, we further read the reviewer’s declaration that the painting is “strong enough on its own.” The more delectably reminiscent tidbit is instead furnished when Suzuki tells us she was pregnant while preparing for this first exhibition (with composer/musician daughter, Chiyoko Szlavnic), and she had camouflaged her expanding girth from the gallery owner for fear that both her reputation as a serious artist and her upcoming show would be jeopardized.

Such anecdotes offer a revealing and poignant glimpse into the harsh social contexts in which Suzuki emerged as an artist. From the vantage point of 2003, the ‘60s may be nostalgically viewed as freewheeling and wild, but

Suzuki's experiences offer insight into the complexly gendered social dynamics and obstacles facing Canadian women artists during this earlier so-called liberated period; a situation further complicated for Suzuki by her identity as a Japanese Canadian. ("It was so-o-o sexist," Suzuki recounts.) A few more questions elicit how she socialized with Toronto artists of the period:

After I went to high school in the 1950s, I was supposed to become a housewife. But I somehow found my way into art school in London [Ontario], with Greg Curnoe and Selwyn Dewdney, who had a wonderful school of art at the time. There were great teachers, such as Tony Urquhart with whom I was able to study. I later moved to Toronto and studied further with artists such as Rick Gorman and Mashel Teitelbaum in the late 1950s. But I have to tell you, the male artists never took women artists seriously. They never included you in their discussions, never considered you equal in terms of artmaking. You might be present, but discussions would never center around your work.

The broader artistic context reveals that Suzuki may be significantly situated within a generation of women artistic contemporaries that includes Joyce Wieland, Betty Goodwin, Irene Whittome and Eva Hesse.

Suzuki's work within the genre of textiles and fibre that began in the 1970s, finds her repeatedly characterized as almost renegade within the medium. In his introduction to a group exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal art critic Gilles Toupin characterized Suzuki's tapestries as crossing with sculpture, and coined the phrase "tapesserie-sculpture" to describe her work. "Aiko Suzuki, plus aérienne et engagée dans la tapisserie-sculpture, crée librement des arabesques spatiales chaleureuses où, comme c'est le cas avec *Lyra's Mom*, subsiste seulement la chaîne." ("Aiko Suzuki, more aerial and engaged in tapesserie-sculpture, freely creates comforting spatial arabesques, or in the case of *Lyra's Mom* we see only the warp."⁴) Toupin's sentence is full of both aerial metaphors and invokes gentle but active gestures through space that wonderfully embody the lightness of *Lyra's Mom* (1979). Gary Michael Dault, writing in the *Toronto Star* in 1978, alludes to Suzuki's interdisciplinary use of media; her intentionality is well conveyed in the heading to Dault's article: "Sculptor's determined to prove artistic worth of fibre hangings."⁵

Suzuki's fibre works were engaged with grandiose scale, and pushed the limits of, and propriety for, textile and fibre art of the period. Particularly with *Stanley Park Parade* (1984), these "constructions" (Dault's term), become like installations which you can move through in the gallery space. Suzuki would herself refer to the textile works that she produced throughout the 1970s and 1980s as "suspensions." The three-dimensional aspect of these suspensions challenged the two-dimensional hanging conventions of tapestry and weaving, but also the heaviness of traditional sculpture's materials. These same characteristics recur in the work of American artist Eva Hesse, particularly in rope pieces such as *Ennead* (1966), with its irregular hangings of soft, dark rope and papier mâché. Or her elegant *Right After* (1969), composed of translucent

fibreglass poured over string, and hung in relaxed loops from elegant wall hooks.⁶ While Suzuki's installations took tapestry and weaving right off the wall, she uses cross-disciplinary metaphors to describe her process: "I broached fibre art more as a painter, where nothing is pre-planned—all my work is always making use of an accidental happening, being inspired as I work. The only limitations I had were size. I used scissors to sculpt, cut things out—the only limitations were the colours that were laid out, and the scale, and how far apart the [wooden] dowlings were."

Beginning in the 1980s, Suzuki undertook printmaking, applying painterly gestures to the work. With their wide range of colours and tones, there is a kinetic quality found in these prints that seems to capture movement and pulsing sensations. With titles like *Brubeck* (1998), and *'Round Midnight* (1998), the ongoing resonance of sound (remember the beating heart), but more particularly jazz, seem to be a pervasive influence throughout her creative process. She recounts haunting Toronto jazz clubs in the 1960s:

I had a studio at Avenue Road and Davenport, and it was right above a club called The Cellar, which was run by a Romanian, and there was regular jazz there. So, I'd work at my studio, and I would go down and listen to jazz. This was in the '60s. There was also an after-hours club around the corner from the downtown library. After the jazz clubs closed, all the musicians would go there and play all night! And I would somehow find and go to these places, and was totally enthralled. I think I work on my paintings the way that musicians improvise: taking risks. What attracts me to the music is that kind of expression and spontaneity—going along little hooks and just loving it.

This connection to jazz became a concrete collaboration when the legendary Stan Getz selected one of Suzuki's paintings for the cover of his album *Voyages* in 1986. During our visit, Suzuki shows us a record cover emblazoned with her own luminous midnight-blue painting. "Someone saw it, and told Stan Getz that they had seen a painting called *Stan Get(z) Blue*. It's because of this title that it all happened, that's how it ended going on the cover. The painting is his now. I shipped it to him in California!"

In our conversation with Suzuki, we talk about her substantial involvement in organizing community-based projects beginning in the early 1990s. In 1992, she undertook the curating of a landmark large-scale group exhibition of 18 artists of First Nations, Inuit and Japanese Canadian heritage entitled "Visions of Power: Contemporary Art by First Nations, Inuit and Japanese Canadians."⁷

The Earth Spirit Festival was my first community experience. I never had done any community work, I was just an artist. Joy Kogawa called me in 1988 and said that she thought that now that Japanese Canadians were on the road to receiving redress, they should celebrate it by organizing an event that honoured First Nations, who were lagging way behind in terms of recompense from the Government. So she conceived of The Earth Spirit Festival, and

brought certain people together. And that was the beginning. Once I was committed, it was two years of solid work. I used my redress money to support myself during this time, so in a way, it went back into the community. It was the best experience I've ever had.

Shortly after the exhibition and festival were concluded, Suzuki embarked on producing “Japanese Canadians In the Arts”, a major directory of professional Japanese Canadian artists, originally published in 1994 and a project she hopes will be regularly updated in the future.

After The Earth Spirit Festival, it occurred to me having identified so many Japanese Canadian artists for the festival, that it would be interesting to further pursue how many artists there were in Canada. And so I sent out a call and the response was overwhelming. People would say ‘Do you know so-and-so? And also so-and-so?’ Artists are never celebrated by the community, so this was a way of doing this. It was a labour of love. And I met many, many artists through this process.

Similar in ambience to Suzuki’s textile environments, her most recent work, *Reflections From the Garden* exudes an organic and contemplative quality. Constructed with found branches within a pool of water, its elemental quality and spatial dimensions allude to the body viewing it as well as the body creating it, much like the heightened brushwork in Suzuki’s paintings and prints, and the discernable gestures that forged them. This embodied quality is also present in her textile art. In talking about the production of *Lyra*, for instance, Suzuki has described the million feet of fibre that constituted it, and how she “walked over 250 miles in her studio... to work the sculpture out.”⁸ She also speaks about how much walking is involved in painting, as she describes moving towards and away from the surface of a painting in order to view it from a distance.

There is a broad arc to the 35 years of creative production that is Aiko Suzuki’s oeuvre: from her hard-edge painting abstractions beginning in the 1960s, to her significant and distinctively innovative work in fibre and textiles, and the cross-disciplinary collaboration with dance performance. From the 1980s and onward, Suzuki continued to paint and draw, and also involved herself in two-dimensional printmaking that she actively continues to create. She also worked with fibreglass-based sculptures and natural sculptural installations. Throughout this vibrant career, Suzuki’s sensuous relationship to her environment can be evinced. From the jazz music that continues to inspire her painting and printmaking, to the sense of dance that permeates the textile suspensions, there is a tactile quality of embodiment that suggestively cradles the inspired artistic impulse at the core of Aiko Suzuki’s art.

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