

# THE VOICE OF SAN FRANCISCO

## 'Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting' to open at SFMOMA

Artist explores the intersections between photography and painting

by **Sharon Anderson**  
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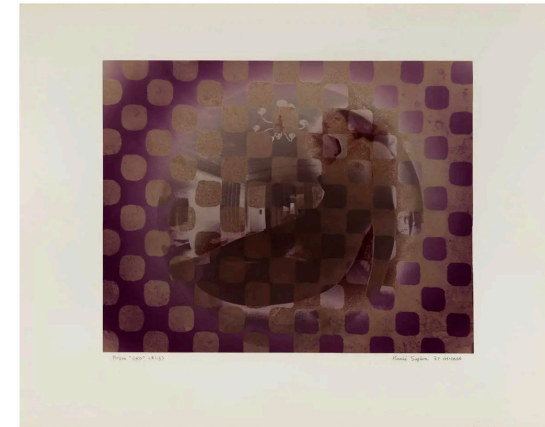


From left : Kunié Sugiura, *Untitled Positive*, 1997; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, promised gift of a private collection; © Kunié Sugiura; photo: Tenari Tuatagaloa  
Kunié Sugiura; *Lily Head Pink*, 2005; Private Collection, United States; © Kunié Sugiura

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art will present the first survey exhibition in the United States of artist Kunié Sugiura. Born in Japan and living in the United States since the 1960s, Sugiura has created work with and without a camera and in and out of the darkroom. The exhibition opens this Saturday, April 26.

*Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting* features over 60 works presented chronologically and by series. Her unique approach to “hybrid” art, painting, photography, and installation spans from the 1960s to as recently as 2021.

### Early years



Kunié Sugiura, *Cko #L5*, 1967; © Kunié Sugiura; photo: Dario Lasagni

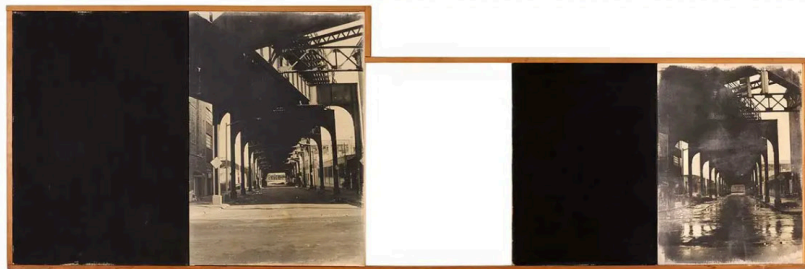
The exhibition overview begins with the work Sugiura made as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), which she attended after emigrating from Japan in 1963. During this time, Sugiura was one of the first students of conceptual artist and photographer Kenneth Josephson. He recommended she focus on documentary-style photography, and Sugiura later gravitated toward the experimental. At SAIC, she experimented in the darkroom, creating psychedelic compositions in color — her *Cko* series reflects her feelings of isolation as a foreign student in the United States.



Kunié Sugiura, *Yellow Mum*, 1969; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase by exchange through gifts of Peggy Guggenheim and Mr. and Mrs. Louis Horig; © Kunié Sugiura; photo: Tenari Tuatagaloa

After moving to New York City in 1967, Sugiura began printing on canvas using photo emulsion. Limitations often lead to innovation, and this was the case when, in absence of a dark room, Sugiura utilized photo emulsion on canvas to enlarge her negatives to up to six by eight feet. She sometimes added graphite or acrylic painting after the fact to heighten contrast. *Yellow Mum* (1969) is an example of work from this period, which features her subject shot at close range, yet closely cropped in a way that creates an image that is both gentle and monolithic.

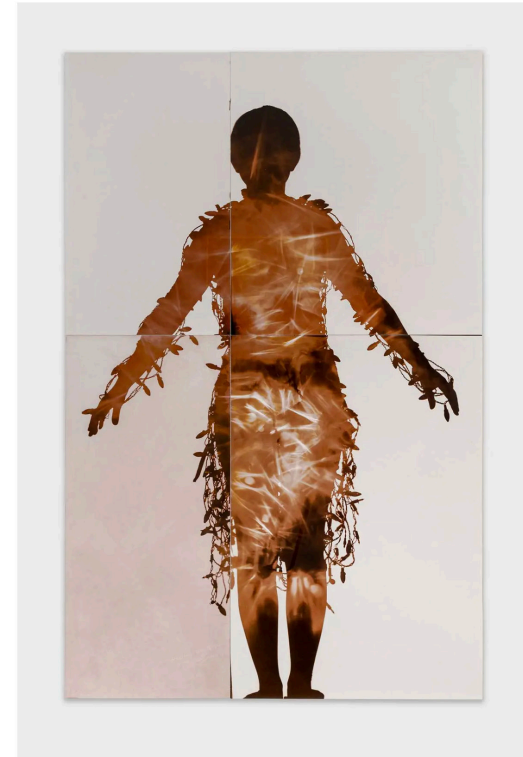
## Photopainting



Kunié Sugiura, *Deadend Street*, 1978; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase, by exchange, through gifts of Peggy Guggenheim and Mr. and Mrs. Louis Honig; © Kunié Sugiura; photo: Tenari Tuatagaloa

*Deadend Street* (1978) is an example of Sugiura's ongoing approach to combine photography with painting and other media in what became her *Photopainting* series. She began to pair photographs printed on canvas with painted panels in a single work, often enclosing them together with wooden supports, sometimes with a pause of empty space in between. *Deadend Street* builds an atmosphere around her moody street photography using paint. The solid panels are reminiscent of Color Field painting, made popular in the New York art world in the 1950s and 1960s.

## The photogram technique



Kunié Sugiura, *After Electric Dress Ap, Pink*, 2001-2; Private Collection; © Kunié Sugiura; photo: Dario Lasagni

During the 1980s, Sugiura experimented with the photogram technique, which allowed her to create images on a light-sensitive surface without the use of a camera. The silhouettes and movements of small animals, flowers, and human figures are recorded via photogram. A selection of Sugiura's photograms will be on view including portraits of artists Jasper Johns, Daido Moriyama, Dennis Oppenheim, and Bill T. Jones, from her *Artist Papers* series, as well as an homage to Atsuko Tanaka's iconic 1956 performance *Electric Dress*.



Kunié Sugiura, *Racks*, 1994; © Kunié Sugiura; photo: Dario Lasagni

Sugiura became fascinated by the X-rays that were taken of her body during a time when she experienced some health issues in the early 1990s. Curiosity about this treatment led her to incorporate prints made from X-ray negatives into her work in various ways, including the installation *Racks* (1994). The *Racks* installation displays the high contrast prints in racks not unlike the postcard racks seen in stores — or in museum gift shops. The images are seen with that sense of fun and play, and the pop idea of multiples in small racks extending toward the ceiling, her work appearing like a commodity for quick sale. During the pandemic, Sugiura returned to using X-ray negatives in her most recent works in this collection.

Blending mediums in unconventional ways while abandoning traditional notions of art gives Sugiura's imagery a particular identity that is singularly her own. [Kunié Sugiura's](#) body of work challenges and expands what photography can be, what painting can communicate, and gives blended art a legitimacy as a serious visual art form.

**Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting** will be on display from April 26 through Sept. 14 at SFMOMA.