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WOMEN BY WOMEN (HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/SERIES/WOMEN-BY-WOMEN/)

Kunié Sugiura by Shelly Silver

Sixty years of playful experiments with photography and painting lead to new discoveries in both media.

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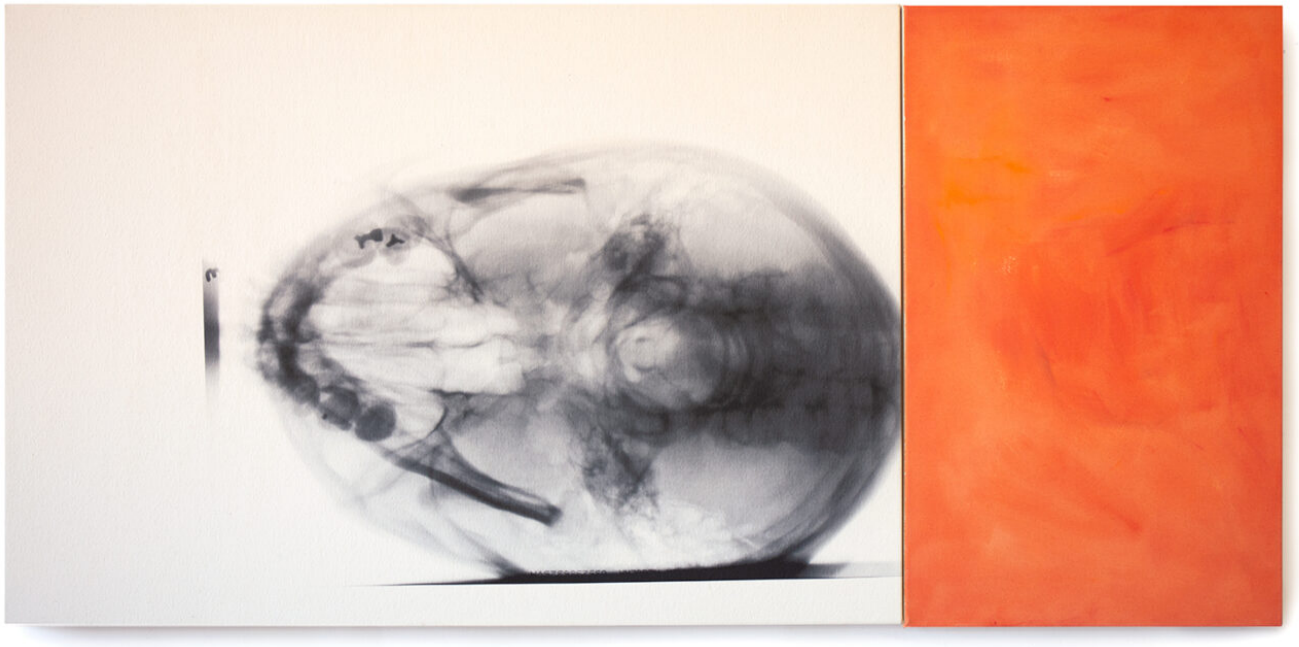


(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_Maxilla_featured.jpg)

Kunié Sugiura, *Maxilla*, 2020, pigment print and acrylic on canvas, two parts, 36 × 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alison Bradley Projects, New York City. © Kunié Sugiura.

Longstanding friendships among artists are precious things. One gets to inhale the work slowly, over decades. I've known Kunié Sugiura since the late 1990s, and she is one of my closest neighbors. I've spent many hours in her live/work loft, notable for its emphasis on work and not comfort, a throwback to a time when artists' spaces did not feature in *The New York Times* real estate section. She invited me to do this interview on the eve of *Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, her first extensive museum show in the United States, at the age of eighty-two (*grumble*). Our conversation afforded the opportunity to spend several days talking about her life and practice. As an interviewee she is, like her work, generous and playful, answering certain questions, jumping over others.

Kunié's work puzzles the media it utilizes. By introducing a disruptive wash of water midway through the developing process, or by patchily applying liquid emulsion to print images on canvas, she mines the chemical and light-based properties of photography for the liminal effects of a medium both handmade and machine aided. Her monochrome paintings—acrylic absorbed into raw canvas—are always presented next to and in relation to her photographs, upending the hierarchy between these two-dimensional formats. Photography, that degraded and "popular" medium, is smuggled into the vaunted realm of painting, and her monochrome rectangles function not as the protagonists of the work but rather as straight man, as foil. As well, she doesn't hold to the typical privileging of particular living forms, rather approaching each in her work—flower, kitten, and human alike—with the same cool curiosity. In this way I find her work prescient. Tightly controlled and then not, her sixty-year practice is experimental, in senses scientific and aesthetic.

"When you see color, there's light. Where there's light, there's life," Kunié says here. After quarantine, Kunié, another neighbor, and I met often for yoga at Kunié's loft, removing nails from the walls where photopaintings hung so as not to impale ourselves. As we twisted our bodies into unlikely positions, we stared at a grid of brightly colored rectangles and X-rays of knees, elbows, and ankles, the large work *Joint-jointed* (2020). As my body resisted, my mind alternated the words *fragile*, *life*, *fragile*, *life*.

Women by Women, a series of interviews between women visual artists, is supported in part by the Deborah Buck Foundation with additional funding from the Judith Whitney Godwin Foundation.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_Jointed-Jointed_1.jpg)

Kunié Sugiura, *Joint-jointed*, 2020, pigment print and acrylic on canvas, eighteen paired parts, 96 × 67 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alison Bradley Projects, New York City. © Kunié Sugiura.

Shelly Silver

I'll start with two fundamental questions. The first is, how do you define photography?

Kunié Sugiura

This is a very big question. Photography is a young visualization medium, compared to painting, and I like this youthfulness. There's still so much to find out about what it can do. Photography is a practical medium, and people use it every day without thinking about art, so I like that it's democratic. It's suited to my temperament because I couldn't paint every day from raw canvas, though I've tried to through the years. With painting, every day you have to decide the next step, and I would become very intimidated. But with photography, you can take photographs and forget about them until you develop them.

From the beginning of my work with photography, I have been totally against what Henri Cartier-Bresson said about it being the "decisive moment." There are many truths to vision, many accumulated decisive moments, and many ways to talk about visualization. I felt those possibilities even in 1964. I have so much respect for the photographic medium, so I like to keep photography as unaltered as I can. I used to paint over photographs, but now I place photographs and painted panels and empty space next to each other so they inform each other. I respect each medium as a separate entity, which is a minimal yet maximal approach. The brain cannot separate them.

SS

There are so many other things photography can do, as you show, in terms of framing and juxtaposition, as a light- and water-based chemical phenomenon, and in combination with other media. My second question is, how do you define painting?

KS

With painting, the observer gets to know the artist's process of mind most intimately. Painters start with a blank canvas, and then they follow an impulse from inside themselves that comes through the hand, then the brush, and then the pigments. The painting accumulates the actions from those impulses, and toward the end, the painter uncovers something that people didn't realize before. Painting, when it's good, is the most exciting, miraculous thing. I accumulate but I don't erase. I'm not used to that kind of repetitive process of Western oil painting. I'm used to calligraphy or Japanese painting. Those artists practice, and when they get it right, they complete the work like a last proof.

SS

I've known you for a long time as a friend and neighbor and, as such, have always thought of you as a private person. Not wanting to overstep boundaries, but how does autobiography play a role in your work?

KS

I used to think that if the artwork is good, then other people will be moved by it. They don't have to know my gender or when I arrived in the United States. I could be gone, and people could still appreciate the work. It's a psychic object. I used to not want to talk about myself, but now when I hear discussions by artists, I learn a lot about what their work means through who they are. That doesn't erase what I felt, and I think discrepancies between the work and the artist make appreciating artworks more meaningful.

SS

Good. So then I feel secure talking about your childhood. You were born in Nagoya, in 1942, during World War II, which was a very tough time in Japan.

KS

My father died before I was two, and my mother took me to my grandmother's house, where my aunt also moved with her four children. For about six months we were all cramped together, until my mother and my other aunt, her youngest sister, who was like a mother to me, decided to go to Tokyo for work. I stayed with my grandmother until I was around six years old, and then my grandmother and I moved to Tokyo too. Our family was four women: my grandmother, my aunt, my mother, and me.

My women-family would nowadays be called a feminist family, but this didn't happen intentionally. It was really for survival. My grandmother wanted women to be educated and economically independent but also, of course, to get married and be good mothers. She expected that and more of me. She had a traditional hair salon, which was a rare profession for women in those days. I loved her, and I was totally immersed in her agenda.

SS

I've made a film of Japanese mothers and daughters, and while doing research, many women talked about hardships during and after the war but also about it being a time of liberation because the men were gone. For example, 1946 was the first year that women were admitted to the University of Tokyo, the premier university in Japan.

KS

I went to Ochanomizu University, which is a very good women's university, but still there was a bias against women. I was studying physics, and the first thing one of the professors said was that he was lowering the standard from normal because we were all girls. But we giggled! That was the way we adjusted to the situation. We couldn't fight, you know. We didn't get there yet.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_Yellow-Mum_4.jpg)

Kunié Sugiura, *Yellow Mum*, 1969, photo emulsion and graphite on canvas, 41.5 × 41.75 inches. Photo by Tenari Tuatagaloa. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

SS

But in a way, you did adjust to the situation by deciding to study in the United States.

KS

I had to have an escape plan. I didn't study art, so I didn't think I could pass the exam for Japanese art schools. My mother met many American families through her work at the post exchange at the US Army base in Tachikawa and was invited to visit the United States a few times. Once she came back and said, "Kunié, where would you like to study in America? I'll

do my best to send you there." She thought America was a much more advanced and free society. I applied to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. They sent me an exam, which took me two months to finish, and they accepted me.

SS

And later your mother followed with your aunt. At SAIC, you studied primarily with Kenneth Josephson, a conceptual photographer working between photographic truth and photographic illusion.

"Photography is not just taking pictures, it's a subliminal field."

— Kunié Sugiura

KS

In Chicago, decades earlier, László Moholy-Nagy had started the New Bauhaus, which didn't last long, but then he founded the Institute of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where Kenneth Josephson studied. The photographers Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan studied with Moholy-Nagy, and Kenneth Josephson from them, and then I from Josephson. Some people thought Chicago was this provincial place, but we got the best Bauhaus education. There were other photography teachers at SAIC, including Barbara Crane, but I studied mostly with Frank Barsotti and Kenneth Josephson.

In the second year at SAIC, I had to decide on a major. I thought about ceramics, but then I didn't like how the clay got under my nails. I took a photography course expecting very little, but immediately I loved it. Photography is not just taking pictures, it's a subliminal field. A photographer could take the same picture over and over, but it could have a different message manipulated into it each time. Josephson thought that women photographers were good with documentary photography, like Margaret Bourke-White or Dorothea Lange, and he even arranged for me to photograph a Japanese American family for a whole semester, but they didn't understand what art was. They only wanted nice, beautiful pictures. So I stopped photographing them. But then I got a very interesting assignment to do sequence photography, and I discovered conceptualism through the work of Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari.

SS

After SAIC, in 1967, you moved to New York City with two other classmates. What was the art scene that you arrived into?

KS

We were just students, and we knew the scene mostly through Japanese artists, like Shusaku Arakawa. We were looking for a place to live, so I went with friends to see Arakawa, who bought a loft on West Houston Street. He told me he was looking for a very famous tenant, which meant not us. (*laughter*) He found Allen Ginsberg and, another time, Bob Dylan, or so we heard. Josephson told me to always bring my work with me, so I showed it to Arakawa, and he was impressed. He asked me to work the camera on a film he was

making, which I said I would love to do. Then he said it was unpaid, but I couldn't do that because I needed a job. I met many other Japanese artists later. A few students also came from Chicago to New York City at the same time as me, so I got connected to them, and we went to SoHo openings, roof parties, and Max's Kansas City.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_-Cko-35_3.jpg)

Kunié Sugiura, *Cko #35*, 1966, chromogenic print, 7.25 × 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alison Bradley Projects, New York City. © Kunié Sugiura.

SS

Your work changed dramatically when you arrived in New York City. At SAIC your thesis project was a group of heavily manipulated photographs, under the made-up title *Cko*. They're largely color works, using a fisheye lens to distort the often-nude human figure. Many of them are made up of multiple oval exposures along with small checkerboards and organic-looking glows. They feel handmade and painterly. Can you talk about these photographic collages and why the work abruptly changed?

KS

I had a Kodak drum processor, which I used to print in color on two small paper sizes using the chromogenic process. I didn't know then that the temperature of the chemical bath had to be very precise, plus or minus half a degree, and the water in my apartment was never consistent, so I gave up on color printing. And I didn't want to make just regular black-and-white prints. When I was in school, there was the *Chicago Show*, which was an annual exhibition of contemporary art at the Art Institute of Chicago. I saw Andy Warhol's big Coca-Cola bottles and Roy Lichtenstein's cartoons there. Those made me think that if an artist puts photographs on canvas, they become paintings. I knew about photo emulsion, which could be painted on anything, so I started using it to print photographs.

In those days, I took pictures whenever I had time, but I went often to Central Park, Coney Island, and the New York Botanical Garden. I wasn't responding to materialistic society or to popular icons but to nature. The photographs were printed with photo emulsion on raw canvas, so the results were usually beige and gray. There wasn't enough contrast between the canvas and the image, so I filled in the dark parts with graphite or black acrylic to heighten the contrast in the images and make them more catchy.

SS

And this is how you made *Yellow Mum*, from 1969, which is an extreme close-up of a mum in a square format.

KS

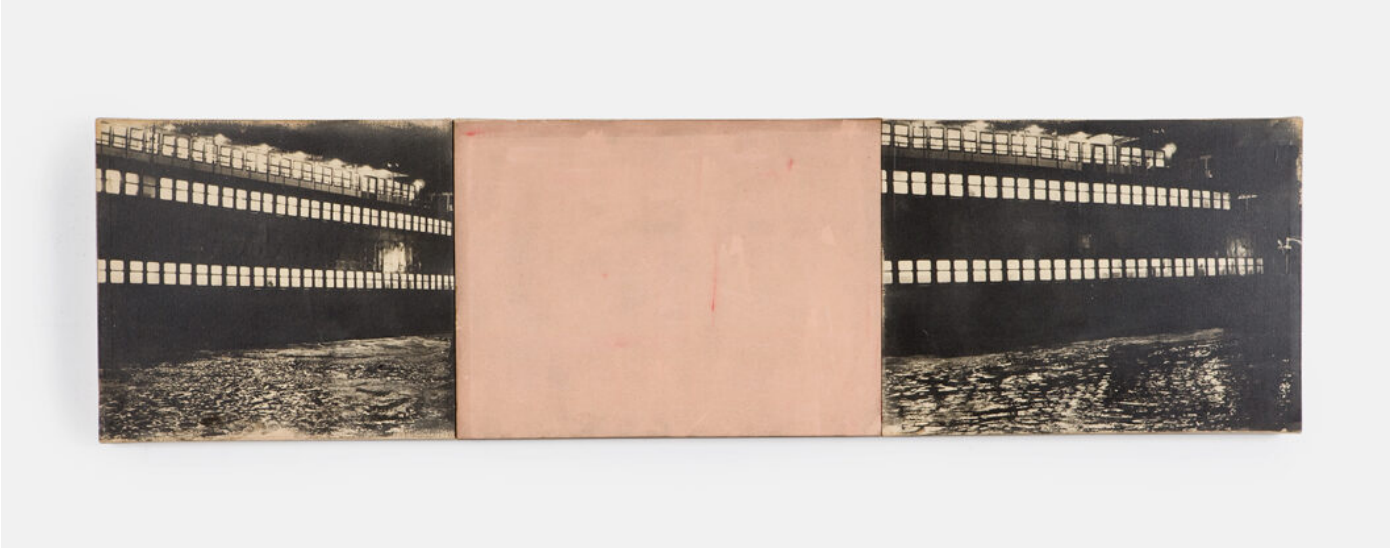
To transfer photographs to canvas, I first had to go through the photographic process. I put a close-up ring on my camera so I could get as close as a few inches to the whole chrysanthemum. Then I printed it about forty inches square, so there's a double enlargement with the close-up and
the printing. I started photographing small things and enlarging them because I wanted to explore another kind of reality.

SS

Central Park 3, from 1971, was made similarly. I know now that it's a granite rock, but with its sandy texture it could also be other things. The image fills the entire frame, so there's even less context than in *Yellow Mum*.

KS

I wanted a kind of ambiguity that only photographs on canvas can convey. I cut away the information so much so that the image falls in between photography and painting. As soon as I establish a way of doing something, I break through to another new territory.



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Kunié Sugiura, *Ferry*, 1978, photo emulsion and acrylic on canvas, 20 × 76 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alison Bradley Projects, New York City. © Kunié Sugiura.

SS

You started making these works, which you call "photocanvases," in 1968. They're typically made up of one canvas with a singular image, which you paint and draw on. In 1976, you started making what you call "photopaintings." What were the reasons for this move?

KS

I had done photo emulsion and painting on canvas, but I no longer wanted that kind of layering. Between 1973 and 1975, I was just painting with acrylic, but not successfully. I happened to put the photographs and paintings parallel to each other so I could see them together. I wanted to show the canvas is a two-dimensional surface, nothing else. I started with white or black paint, but later on I thought to use color to supplement what black-and-white photographs are missing. I felt that photography was one flash for a very short time, so I started taking photographs of regular street life. The photographs are optical, two-dimensional, but there's the illusion of depth. I wanted the painting to be abstract or generalized, so I usually chose monochrome.

SS

I grew up in New York City and am always interested in how someone who's arrived from somewhere else images the city. These works have to do with architecture, and the buildings are often shot at night, when one sees the repeating rectangles of the lit windows and the ghost of the building they're attached to. There's implied movement, as in the ferries in *Two Boats*, from 1979, where the boats appear to be struggling to move forward while being pulled to the bottom right of the frame. The strong diagonals play off of the rigid rectangle of the canvases. And they're paired with a monochrome canvas, and the canvases are juxtaposed. I see this relationship as upending the typical hierarchical supremacy of painting, which was very strong in the 1970s and still remains so. I'd hazard that in these works the painting needs the photograph more. The painted canvas is needy for the photograph.

KS

I was thinking the canvas is the material to show the photograph, and the painting is something two-dimensional to express an illusion. Later, I thought a color totally unrelated to the photograph would be much more interesting because art, after all, is an irrational thing. *Ferry*, from 1978, has photographs of the Staten Island Ferry on the water, and I put pink in between the photographs, instead of blue for the water or black for the night, so that the work becomes more surrealistic. Some of the paintings aren't monochromes: *Christie Street* has stripes, which some people liked, so I thought I didn't always have to use just one color. Also, when it comes to my titles, I think they should be very punchy, very effective. I want the title to change unexpectedly. Some titles are very meaningful, some titles surprise: I named the photopainting *Christie Street* to entice the auction house, but I took the photograph on Church Street.

SS

That's also one of the things I admire about your work: It's not doctrinaire. You have a framework, but then you feel free to change it up. What kind of camera were you using to take these photographs? They're often off-kilter, akin to snapshots.

KS

Sometimes I used a Yashica 2¼ × 2¼, but mostly a 35 mm. Those cameras have no adjustments like a 4 × 5 camera does. I like snapshot photographs because they're something I can make anytime. After taking nature as a subject, I started photographing life in New York City more, particularly when I moved downtown in 1974 to a loft with artist neighbors. I focused on the city as a personal environment. I had lived on the Upper West Side from 1967 to 1973, among conventional middle-class people, but when I moved downtown, to Chinatown, the city interested me a lot more. The inhabitants became more discrete and attractive to me.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_Deadend-Street_6.jpg)

Deadend Street, 1978, photo emulsion and acrylic on canvas, 37 × 114 inches. Photo by Tenari Tuatagaloa. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

SS

Let's talk about the large painting, *Deadend Street*, from 1978. I'm struck by the repetition and difference of the receding arches of the elevated subway, which spatially draws us in, and the almost-repetition of the two photographs, one large, one small. The piece is both image and object, with not only the three-dimensionality of the canvas, which might be taken for granted in a painting unlike in a photograph, but also the wood joining the five rectangles.

KS

I didn't study Japanese philosophy or Japanese architecture, but if you grow up in Japan, you absorb lots of those ideas, like *ma*. When I was making *Deadend Street*, I had two sets of images: One was from a very sunny day, and the other was after a rainy day, so the street

was wet. The photograph of the sunny day is paired with a matte black panel, and the photograph after the rainy day is next to a sleek black panel. I wanted to put these parts together, but they're from different days, so I had to have some opening between them. This is the idea of ma. In Japan people use ma to express a time, or a space, or an interval, even a tentative feeling. In Japan the concept of time always comes from living through time. You are always aware that you are mortal, and time is a kind of measurement of how much time you have left. Ma becomes a connection between these two different times, during and after. The opening in the middle of *Deadend Street* makes a natural progression out of the five parts.

SS

The space or opening between the two sets of canvases engages the wall—it *is* the wall and will take on the texture and color of the room. Part of the wall is framed by the work, but the wall continues all around.

KS

It's like water coming into your life. It's there all the time. I like it to be open but full, open but occupying the situation. It's not an arbitrary white square; it's connected to real space, and time shifts in real space. The opening connects real space and alluring space, like ma as that time between living and being dead. Ma is intimate, like a life cycle.

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Kunié Sugiura, *Rashomon*, 1997, gelatin silver print, 40 × 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alison Bradley Projects, New York City. © Kunié Sugiura.

"I went as far as I could go, all the way back to the beginning of photography."

— Kunié Sugiura

SS

After this series of photopaintings, you made another big jump, to photograms.

KS

Because I couldn't show anywhere for a long time. Or finally something would start to happen but then fall apart. I was very depressed for a while, and I thought to do something totally different from photopainting. I went as far as I could go, all the way back to the beginning of photography. Originally, photographers didn't have cameras, they didn't have darkrooms, they didn't have fixative chemicals. So I started doing photograms, or what William Henry Fox Talbot called in the nineteenth century "photogenic drawing." *Photogram* is Moholy-Nagy's word.

SS

The objects you use to make the photograms are in fact living beings. They pull in this idea of a body, whether that body belongs to an animal, a human, or a flower. This ties in with work from decades earlier. I remember being bowled over by your 2007 show, *Sex & Nature*, which included large photocanvases of a couple having sex, made in 1970. They're close-ups that are way bigger than life-size, so both intimate and absorbing, like a landscape. We are in the room with them—we feel extremely close to these people. There's one where the woman is on top of the man, and you can see the repetition of the stubble of her armpit hair. Some people might find these off-putting, but I find them tender.

In much of your work I'm reminded of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's essay on Japanese architecture, *In Praise of Shadows*, which rails against the bright white lighting and surfaces of the West. The essay opens with a long ode to the Japanese traditional toilet, including its light, texture, smells, and sounds. You expand this to the nonhuman realm.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_The-Boxing-Papers_7.jpg)

Kunié Sugiura, *The Boxing Papers, Shinohara B Positive 2*, 2000, four gelatin silver prints, each 39 × 29.5 inches. Courtesy of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

KS

I always took humans as being a part of nature. We are no better or no worse than little animals and flowers. In the 1980s, somebody gave me flowers. I used the flowers in a photogram and saw their shadows, which were so beautiful. In Chinatown, where I live, there are live frogs and eels in markets, so I started bringing those home to make photograms, which became *Hoppings* and *Eel*. And then I got to making *The Kitten Papers*. Somebody was giving away two kittens, and I had two grown-up cats, so I thought they would take care of them. I brought the kittens home, but the grown cats hated them, so I had to separate them. I put the kittens in the darkroom at night, under red light, and then I thought to put photo paper underneath them and see what happens. The kittens were eating, drinking, shitting, and sleeping on photo paper. They were so lovely and helpless and tiny, and their shadows were vague. After the first night, the discovery that the kittens were making art was exciting to me.

SS

I love that series. The kittens are represented by their silhouettes as they sleep, as are the liquids they exude over the course of the night. There's a visceral yet matter-of-fact nature to them. The approach you take is akin to a scientific experiment, with its "what happens when…" quality.

You also did quite an extensive series of photogram portraits—the *Artist* series, the *Scientist* series, *The Boxing Papers*, and *Intimates*, which again portrays the intimate relations of couples. Like much of your work, I imagine these entailed some sort of collaboration, and I mean "collaboration," of course, in the widest sense. It's not like you were saying to the

kittens, "Let's collaborate," although, in fact, it was a collaboration because you had control of only certain parameters. Having a limited amount of control is part of your art practice; I feel like you're both attracted to control as well as committed to giving it up.

KS

Some people use "collaboration" as if it's a cliché, but actually it resonated with me in a very interesting way. I was working for a Japanese art magazine, *Bijutsu Techo*, for twenty-two years on and off, writing news from New York City. I sent out almost four hundred pieces. I was always thinking, What is art? What is an artist? In a sense, with the *Artist* series, finally I could go face-to-face with these questions in my darkroom.

SS

The artist portrait *After Electric Dress Pink*, from 2002, is unlike the others. Could you tell me a bit about it?

"I think with photography, first you have to learn how to do its formula, then you have to learn how to break it down."

— Kunié Sugiura

KS

I had learned about the Gutai artist Atsuko Tanaka, who had very innovative, far-out ideas about making artworks. One of her works was a body-armature piece called *Electric Dress*, which has electric lights of many different colors. When she put it on her body, it would light up like a Christmas tree. The effect was beautiful. I thought to try my own version of *Electric Dress* with a friend. I had some Christmas lights my mother was going to throw out, so I wrapped them around her, and then when she flashed the lights, I flashed my light too. On the wall I put up four pieces of photo paper to document it, and then we did this a couple of times. The original is a black background, and the body is kind of whitish, but I made a contact print, so black becomes white and white becomes black. Black and white is kind of cold, so I toned it pink.

SS

It's quite different from most photograms because the Christmas lights emit light, giving the portrait a magical quality.

Another series, *The Boxing Papers*, specifically *Shinohara B*, appears to capture movement in the flash of a one-hundred-twenty-fifth of a second. There's a silhouette of a figure caught mid-punch, his glove surrounded by a descending splatter of some sort of liquid, rendered black. The photogram freezes the gesture but also the trajectory of this liquid.

KS

I like action pieces. I like performance. If I'm making a photogram of someone and they do something, that's what I document. Ushio Shinohara, the artist, is hitting a bucket in the photogram. Originally, Shinohara and his wife were going to box, but she didn't want to do it, so at the last minute, I took a bucket and put the sand in it. Shinohara had these

performance pieces called *Boxing Painting*, because he thought Robert Rauschenberg and other artists did "action painting," as abstract expressionism was sometimes called, so he wanted to document his action as a boxer and a painter. *Shinohara B* has a kind of sumi-e treatment. He put the sumi ink in his prepared boxing gloves, so the photogram really captures splashes of sumi ink. This is a unique piece, so I could play along. I think with photography, first you have to learn how to do its formula, then you have to learn how to break it down. That way you get new information and new discoveries.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/BOMB-171-Spring-2025/_hiresolution/Kunié-Sugiura_Big-Mammo_8.jpg)

Kunié Sugiura *Big Mammo*, 2021, pigment print, acrylic, and graphite on canvas, two parts, 60 × 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Alison Bradley Projects, New York City. © Kunié Sugiura.

SS

Another series, which is based on a similar technology to the photogram, is *X-rays*. This is the only example I know of where you use found material—actual medical X-rays. Light, as a wave, is very weak, so it illuminates whatever object it hits, whereas the radioactive wavelengths of X-rays are high-powered and can go through the flesh and muscle of the body to illuminate the bone. Why did you start using X-rays?

KS

I had a collapsed lung in 1990. In the hospital, they started taking X-rays every four hours because they wanted to see how it was recovering. One day I saw they had files of different people's X-rays, which they were going to throw out. I said I wanted to keep mine, which they agreed to, and when I asked for the others, they said I had to cut off the names, which I did. I got a whole box of X-rays, lots of excellent film. First, I started looking for some interesting images, but there were none on their own, so I had to put the pieces together. They started to make a figure, so I pieced together parts from the head, and then I made mutant bodies. When Covid happened in 2020, I was cleaning up lots of things in my studio, and I looked again at the X-rays I hadn't used yet. I thought I could do something with them. Now I work with Griffin Editions, and they do pigment printing on canvas, so I started putting some X-ray images together with color panels. When you see color, there's light. Where there's light, there's life. That is my pairing. Maybe the X-ray part is about disease or death, but the colored panel part is a hope for the future. I also made *Big Mammo*—all women go through this and hope for a good result.

SS

Big Mammo is an enlargement of a detailed mammogram. We see the profile of a woman's breast, where the delicate web of veins is visible, the poetry of which is undercut by the two more clinical views of the breast in the upper-right corner, snapping us back to its medical provenance.

KS

We never really look at these X-rays, and I don't know what doctors are looking for in the images, but there are all kinds of points and lines. It's fascinating. The X-rays are medical but also artistic, in my case. I might be a creepy person, but I don't care; I think the body is beautiful because it's nature's gift to us.

SS

It's an interesting question: What person would want to hang an artwork utilizing an X-ray in their home? I feel connected to your work with its unflinching look at bodies, bodily activities, systems and breakdowns of systems, and what isn't usually seen as desirous to look at. As an artist you seem fiercely independent, following your curiosities, regardless of current trends. And you've been committed to making work, regardless of recognition.

KS

I don't think success makes you happy. I decided for myself what I want to do and what is good for me, regardless of other people knowing or supporting me. I go through it on my own, and when I find something, I want other people to share in my joy. Money can buy lots of things, that I understand, but I don't think money can do everything. Friendship, or sharing things, is something free and wonderful and available to all of us.

"When I do new work, I take chances, and I might fail, but going ahead is important."

— Kunié Sugiura

SS

But I would say that you are successful because here we are, looking at these incredible bodies of work, many of which will be exhibited as part of your major show at SFMOMA. This comes after your retrospective in 2018 at the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, which I was lucky to see. Although, considering the depth and the breadth and the groundbreaking nature of your work, it does seem that all of this should have happened much sooner and continuously. There's this phenomenon of women being discovered later in their lifetimes after working for decades, half centuries—Joan Jonas, Carolee Schneeman, Lorraine O'Grady, really the examples are sadly too numerous to list. Of course, it's better to be discovered late rather than never, but it does seem like a symptom that the culture isn't interested in or is afraid of the way women see the world. Or it's mostly interested in preserving male power. What do you think?

KS

I think when women are young, because they are beautiful, they are like flowers, and people pay attention to them. But now, in my eighties, I feel like I love differently. I love nature. I love the universe. I don't look for the one-to-one, like I did when I was young. I don't want a mate anymore, because you can be more beneficial to many things otherwise. So I think, in a sense, to be successful later, if I can say that, is really much better for me. I'm not afraid to talk about what I think at this juncture.

SS

I'm brought back to the beginning of this interview, to where you came from—to your strong women-family.

KS

And I'm optimistic.

SS

And you're optimistic. Maybe more than me. (*laughter*) What are you working on now?

KS

If I don't make art, I don't think. That's my identity. I may make some discoveries with the next pieces. When I do new work, I take chances, and I might fail, but going ahead is important. As I develop the new pieces into a series, I start to understand where they're taking me.

I think dying is a very interesting process, too, and I don't think we should negate it, which we have done for a long time. I think we should really take care to make death meaningful. That's what I want to do. Body and soul are connected, aren't they?

Shelly Silver is an artist and filmmaker working with the still and moving image. Her work has been shown extensively. She's currently making a film in Potsdam, Germany, combining Frederick II, militarism, the Enlightenment, dictatorship, climate change, capitalism, cinema, and a combative film student shooting a purposefully impossible film. Silver is a professor in the Visual Arts Program at Columbia University. She is a contributing editor at BOMB.

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