

May 7 - June 11 2005

# **Bombard/Invade/Radiate** **Aiko Suzuki**



Opening Reception Saturday May 7th 3-5pm

## **Bombard/Invade/Radiate: Witness** **By Kerri Sakamoto**

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.  
Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
That if it would but apprehend some joy,  
It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

-A Midsummer Night's Dream (Act V, scene I)

In the work of Aiko Suzuki that hangs in the steep, sky-lit stairwell of my house, there is the evidence of something just having happened - in abstracted mid-air or fathomless watery depths. A whorl and a dusting of paint are left in the wake of some alchemy, some gentle upsweeping cataclysm. That "glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven" is suggested - if not in the poet's eye, then in the eye of the artist. What seems materialized is that very instance in which "airy nothing" is given its "local habitation." The artist has captured an event of the natural world that gives way to inner realms of lived life, of psychic and bodily ebb and flow.

Aiko Suzuki's works - her painting, printmaking, and sculptural installations - resonate with a sense of life's mutability, and gesture to a state of quiet yet not undisturbed contemplation. In a recent installation, branches rise starkly from a pool of water, an apt site for Zen-like meditation. But the pool is black and the branches are brittle, half-clad in copper. An ambient dissonance (a sound work composed by Chiyoko Szlavncs) reverberates through the space, as does the ping of water droplets that break the pool's surface at intervals. We stand alone or in silence among others and the intervals seem interminable, yet they accumulate, as do the drops that replenish the pool. When we emerge from the gallery into the dimming afternoon light, a glance or word might be exchanged with a fellow visitor - to acknowledge the lapse of time, a subtly altered state within. It is an experience of the communal and the solitary.



As individuals engaged with the world and with one another, how do we breach that solitude? How do we share experiences - of the particular, the strange, the horrific, the blissful? How do we make familiar and comprehensible the abstract, the complex, or the unimaginable? Artists, writers, and all users of everyday language find themselves compelled to exploit the communicative possibilities beyond plain words, of images and metaphor, to convey meaning.

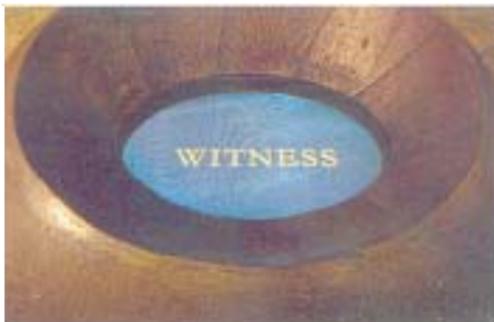
When Aiko Suzuki was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2002, she was confronted with that term - cancer - in all its stigma and opacity. As she began to communicate with practitioners, family, and friends about her illness, she experienced the inadequacy of language and its insidious capacity to reduce and distort meaning. Inspired by Susan Sontag's ground breaking work, *Illness as Metaphor*, Suzuki was struck by the imagery of war commonly used to depict cancer and its treatment.

...every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology. Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are "invasive." (*Illness as Metaphor*, p. 64)

Radiotherapy uses the metaphors of aerial warfare; patients are "bombed" with toxic rays. And chemotherapy is chemical warfare, using poisons. Treatment aims to "kill" cancer cells (without, it is hoped, killing the patient). (p. 65)

True to Sontag's vision, Suzuki's installation aims to subvert militaristic caricatures of cancer and its surrounding stigma. The artist achieves this subversion in part through elements that forge intimacy in place of obfuscation. In three large projections, Suzuki stands at the seashore waving flags signaling by semaphore (a system of military signing)-itself a kind of metaphoric language - three words: bombard, invade, radiate. She appears in three stages of undress. In the third, her scarred chest is visible where her left breast has been removed: the veil lifted from a previously taboo sight.

On a far wall of the gallery, three listening posts are embedded, drawing the visitor close to eavesdrop on excerpts of conversations between Suzuki and her oncologist. Here the vocabulary of warfare is startling, voiced as it is in disembodied quiet by the authoritative physician; the effect is both lulling and unnerving. Overhearing these conversations renders us third-party participants in a system of thought that characterizes the patient's body as the collateral damage in its own treatment, in the name of healing.



In fact, Suzuki names us witnesses. On a video monitor set face up, World War II footage of bombs released from American fighter planes plays continuously. The word "witness" flashes. The images are iconic: we can't help but think of the Enola Gay dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. But as the screen lies belly up, the bombs seem to float upward in the sky, topsyturvy. Droplets of water fall onto the monitor's surface in a slow rhythm that overrides the soundless dropping of bombs. We wait for some final moment, some end, but it never arrives. The images play ominously to the slow drip of time. Only then do we notice that the monitor is enclosed in a rusted bomb casing, a relic of war that is antiquated but not obsolete.

The elements of the installation coalesce powerfully; they radiate with metaphorical and symbolic resonances that undermine and indict cloud and illuminate. The mastectomy scar of the cancer survivor can be likened to the keloid scar of a shunned atomic bomb survivor, a *hibakusha* from Hiroshima. She may signal aggressive action yet she waves her flags with dispassionate lyricism, as if signaling surrender as a white dove of peace flutters past. The fighter planes that drop their bombs invoke today's stealth aircraft invading Afghanistan or Iraq in pursuit of the modern-day Hitlers or Hirohitos, Saddam Husseins or Osama bin Ladens. The "collateral damage" that is wreaked, the loss of civilian life, is reduced to a metaphor of economic casualty.

*Bombard/Invade/Radiate* emanates beyond reductive metaphor, exploring the vital and poetic possibilities of metaphoric thought in relation to war and illness. It poses timely questions: How do we traverse the minefield of metaphors, doubt those who play on our nightly fears, who tell us a "bush" might be a "bear" or a weapon of mass destruction? How can we act as critical citizens to resist complicity and the rhetoric that is deployed to rationalize war?

And as sentient individuals, how can we be accurate and compassionate witnesses to the pain, suffering, and life of another? How do we guard against a complacent acceptance of metaphorical ideas, withstand the tricks of "strong imagination" - that leave us fearful and remote from dreaded illness and death?

Kerri Sakamoto is a Toronto-based writer. Her first novel, *The Electrical Field*, received the overall Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book and was a finalist for a Governor General's Award. Her most recent book, *One Hundred Million Hearts*, is published by Knopf Canada. She is co-editor, with Helen Lee, of *Like Mangoes in July: The Work of Richard Fung*, published by Insomniac Press.



For over three decades, **Aiko Suzuki** has worked in a variety of mediums, including painting, mixed media, fibrework, and printmaking. Recently, she has incorporated natural materials (bamboo, vines, branches) in works that invoke yet alter traditions and the nature-worship inherent in her Japanese heritage. In an installation created for a retrospective show at Gendai Gallery in 2003, she drew on elements of a Japanese garden - branches coated in copper standing in a black pool of water amid a soundscape - to forge a subtly dissonant space of contemplation. Suzuki has won numerous awards and commissions, and her works are in museum collections across Canada. Since 1969, she has collaborated with major Canadian modern dance choreographers, designing sets that have toured internationally. The artist is extremely grateful to Midi Onodera and Chiyoko Szlavncics, who contributed to this project as true collaborators, offering aesthetic and critical feedback throughout the process. Visit Aiko's website at [www.magma.ca/aiko](http://www.magma.ca/aiko).

**Marilyn Jung** is an independent curator of contemporary Asian visual arts, cultural worker, and arts administrator. Marilyn acted as coordinator for Bombard/Invade/Radiate. Civil servant by day, she is currently on the Board of Fuse Magazine and is affiliated with the Gendai Gallery, Toronto.

**Midi Onodera** is an award-winning, Toronto-based filmmaker who has been directing, producing, and writing films for 20 years. She has over 25 independent short films to her credit as well as a theatrical feature film, *Skin Deep*. Midi's films have been critically praised and included in numerous exhibitions and screenings internationally. Currently Midi is in post-production on a long-format video shot in Japan and entitled *I Have No Memory of My Direction*. This project deals with the loss of memory, the temporal space of digital photography, and the ghosts of inherited imagination.

Currently based in Berlin, **Chiyoko Szlavncics** has been working as a composer and musician since 1992. While in Toronto, she was a member of the Hemispheres and 40 Fingers saxophone quartet and composed for these ensembles as well as for Wandelweiser, among others. She has also collaborated on dance and theatre projects. Szlavncics has recently become the co-artistic director, with Peter Ablinger, of the experimental Berlin ensemble *Zwischentone*. Szlavncics's first sound installation was developed for Aiko Suzuki's retrospective exhibition at the Gendai Gallery in 2003. The sound elements in the current show were developed in close collaboration with the artist.

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