

LIVES LIVED

Aiko Suzuki

Visual artist, art educator, cultural visionary, activist, mother. Born Oct. 22, 1937. Died Dec. 31, 2005, in Toronto, of breast cancer, aged 68.

Aiko Suzuki was a force of nature. She was bursting with boundless energy, a restless intelligence, a generous and just heart, and a true Bohemian spirit.

Born Geraldine Aiko Suzuki in 1937, Aiko was the third of four children of Kaoru and Setsu Suzuki who lived in Marpole, B.C. In 1942, along with thousands of other Japanese Canadians, her family was moved to one of several internment camps in the B.C. interior.

At the end of the war, the Suzuki family resettled in London, Ont., where the daughters were groomed for traditional married life. But Aiko - already acknowledged as unusually gifted - chose to attend the London Artists' Workshop. It was an experience that set her firmly on an unconventional path.

Aiko left London in 1958 and joined the Toronto Artists' Workshop. She quickly became part of the city's bohemian art world. In 1965 she married the late Alexander Szlavnic, an iconoclastic makeup artist for the Canadian Opera Company; two years later, their daughter Chiyoko) was born. Aiko often recounted a legendary concert by John Cage that she attended with her young daughter on her knee. Chiyoko grew up to become a composer of experimental music.

Aiko struggled to her way in a male-dominated art world. She succeeded in bringing textile art out of its ghettos of "craft" and "women's work." Her dramatic textile masterpiece, *Lyra*, became familiar sight to Torontonians in the front foyer of Toronto Public Library. *Lyra* was akin to a living drawing created with fibres instead of pencil strokes, hovering above a reflecting pool, offering visitors a moment's calm amid a busy metropolis.

The unique aesthetic she honed was, in her words, "light and quick." She merged the bravado of abstract expressionism with a spare, elemental sense of nature. In all her work there is a flurry captured, a split-second motion with an uncanny stillness at its core. This was especially true of the stark, sweeping set designs for dance she created in the 1970s and 80s.

Like her art, Aiko was forever in motion. Even when suffering with rheumatoid arthritis and cancer, she bristled with physical and intellectual vitality, and a fierce commitment to social justice.

As an artist, curator and organizer, Aiko's vision was to forge connections between art, community and everyday life. She brought contemporary art into new spaces, enriching diverse ethnic communities and giving recognition to their artists. For example, Aiko's 1991 exhibition, *Visions of Power: Contemporary Art by First Nations, Inuit and Japanese Canadians*, enabled Japanese Canadians to share their resources with marginalized artists from other cultures.

In 1994, Aiko founded the Gendai Gallery as a non-profit art space at the Japanese Canadian Cultural And for more than a quarter-century, Aiko was a mentor to hundreds of artists.



One of Aiko's last exhibitions was her boldest and most personal. In *Bombard/Invade/Radiate* she drew "on her experience with breast cancer. Using video, audio and photography, she turned the camera onto herself. She addressed difficult issues unflinchingly: how cancer and its treatment are reduced in medical and popular discourse to metaphors of warfare; how this separates us from the realities of illness and death, and ultimately, from the suffering of our loved ones.

Aiko Suzuki did not allow us to distance ourselves. With intensity and joyous spontaneity, she bridged this distance in her art and in her every encounter.

Kerri Sakamoto

Kerri Sakamoto is a Toronto-based novelist and friend of Aiko Suzuki.