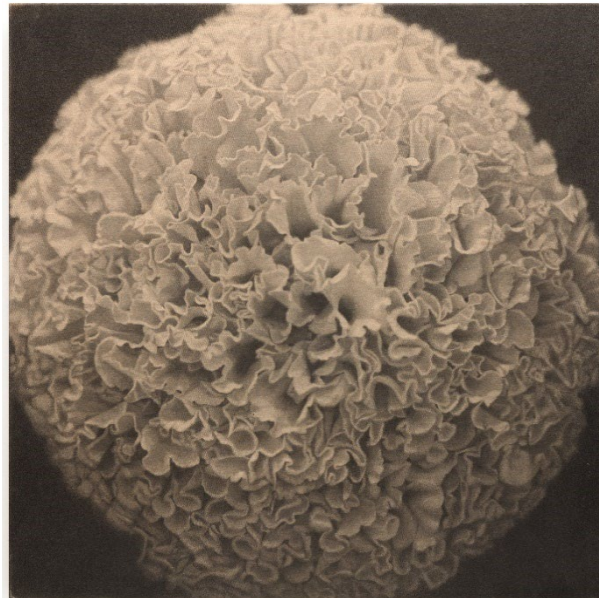




First U.S. Survey Exhibition for Kunié Sugiura Opens at SFMOMA in April 2025

Featuring More than 60 Works that Challenge the Conventions
of Photography



Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting
April 26 – September 14, 2025

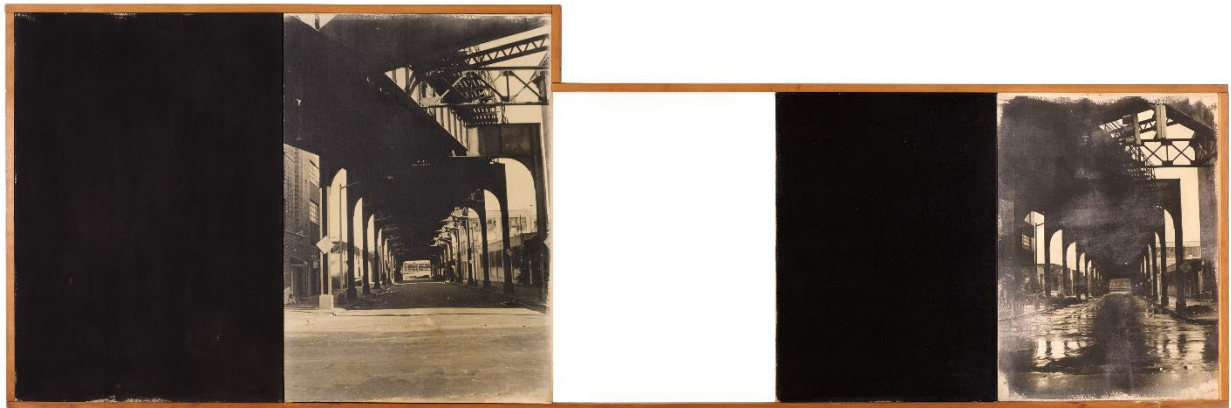
SAN FRANCISCO, CA (December 3, 2024, updated May 13, 2025) – For more than 60 years, Kunié Sugiura has explored the intersections between photography and painting with an aesthetic sensibility that reflects her bicultural identity as a Japanese artist who has lived in the U.S. since the 1960s. Creating work with and without a camera—and in and out of the darkroom—Sugiura has combined photography with painting and other mediums to produce unique, hybrid works that defy easy categorization. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) presents *Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting*, the artist’s first survey exhibition in the U.S., on view from April 26 to September 14, 2025.

Organized roughly chronologically and by series, *Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting* features over 60 works in photography, painting and installation that span from the 1960s to as recently as 2021. While her practice is rooted in photography, Sugiura has drawn inspiration from

contemporary painting and sculpture, deploying photographic processes in unexpected and often unconventional ways. This blending of mediums, Sugiura has said, partly arose from her desire for photography to be recognized as a serious art form.

“Sugiura’s many experiments and explorations with the photographic medium upend our notions of what photography can be,” said Christopher Bedford, the Helen and Charles Schwab Director at SFMOMA. “We look forward to engaging our communities with Kunié Sugiura’s art and are honored to open the first survey exhibition of her work in the U.S.”

“Throughout her career, Kunié Sugiura has subverted traditional notions of photography, bravely bucking trends to produce a distinctive body of work that is unmistakably her own,” said Erin O’Toole, SFMOMA’s curator and head of photography.



Exhibition Overview

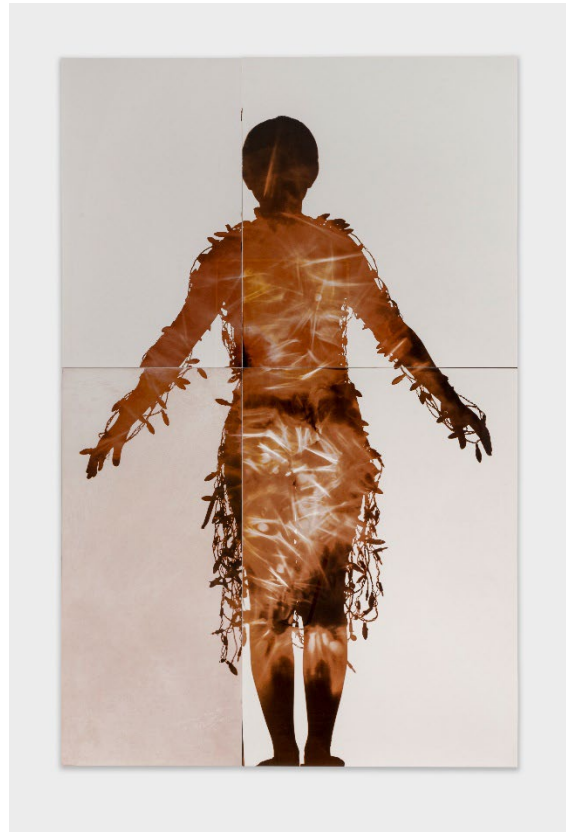
Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting charts the arc of Sugiura’s six-decade career to date. The exhibition begins with work that she made as a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), which she attended after immigrating to the U.S. from Japan in 1963. At SAIC, she experimented in the darkroom, creating psychedelic compositions in color—her *Cko* series—that reflected her feelings of isolation as a foreign student in the U.S.

After graduating in 1967, Sugiura moved to New York City, where she was suddenly without access to a color darkroom. In need of a new way to create photographs, she began printing on canvas using photo emulsion. Working in this way allowed her to enlarge her negatives to up to six by eight feet; afterward, she sometimes added graphite or acrylic paint 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 renders it enticingly unfamiliar.

Sugiura continued in the 1970s to combine photography with painting and other media. In her *Photopaintings* series, she paired 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. While some of these works continued her interest in abstracting familiar organic shapes and subjects, others featured glimpses of life around her in New York City, as in the monumental *Deadend Street* (1978), which joined monochromatic painted panels with photographs taken at different times of the same location.

Beginning in 1980, Sugiura experimented with the photogram technique, which allowed her to create images on a light-sensitive surface without the use of a camera. Her photograms recorded the silhouettes or movements of small animals, flowers and human figures in inventive and sometimes provocative ways. The exhibition features a selection of Sugiura's photograms, 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*.



After experiencing some health issues in the early 1990s, Sugiura became fascinated by the X-rays that were taken of her body during her treatment. She began incorporating prints made from X-ray negatives into her work in various ways, including the installation *Racks* (1994). During the pandemic, Sugiura revisited her previous use of X-ray negatives in the most recent work in the exhibition.



About Kunié Sugiura

Kunié Sugiura was born in Nagoya, Japan, in 1942 during World War II, and was raised by her mother and grandmother, who believed in the importance of women's education and financial independence. Sugiura immigrated to the U.S. in 1963 to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she was one of the first students of conceptual artist and photographer Kenneth Josephson. At his recommendation, she initially focused on documentary-style photography, later gravitating towards a more experimental approach.

After graduating, Sugiura moved to New York City, which forced her to rethink her approach to photography. A work from her *Cko* series was included in the landmark 1969 exhibition at the George Eastman House, *Vision and Expression*, which featured contemporary artists using photography in innovative ways. One of her large-scale *Photocanvas* works appeared in the Whitney Museum's 1972 *Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Painting*, organized by Marcia Tucker. Her floral photograms were featured in *New Photography 1997*, organized by Susan Kismaric for The Museum of Modern Art, New York. From 1986 to 2008, Sugiura wrote a column titled "New York Report" for the Japanese-language magazine *Bijutsu Techo*, in which she reviewed gallery and museum exhibitions. In 2018, a major retrospective of her art was mounted by the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum.

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by *Kunié Sugiura*, a book published by MACK, London, featuring more than 90 illustrations of the artist's work and an essay by SFMOMA's curator and head of photography, Erin O'Toole, on the development of the artist's dynamic art practice over nearly six decades. Sugiura's manifold engagements with the mediums of photography, painting, and sculpture are brought together in this collection of her defining works.

Organization

Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting is organized by SFMOMA and curated by Erin O'Toole, curator and head of photography, with Delphine Sims, assistant curator of photography.

Support

Lead support for *Kunié Sugiura: Photopainting* is provided by the Stone Charitable Remainder Trust. Major support is provided by the Pritzker Exhibition Fund in Photography.

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San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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Image Captions:

Kunié Sugiura, *Yellow Mum*, 1969; 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

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

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