

From:

Zeigler, Barbara. "Michiko Suzuki's Hope Chests." *Hope Chests*, exhibition catalogue. Burnaby, B.C.: Burnaby Art Gallery, 2016: 44-47. Print.

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### Michiko Suzuki's *Hope Chests*

Before she first came to Vancouver from Tokyo as an artist-in-residence in the printmaking department at Capilano College (now Capilano University) in 2003, I was aware of Michiko Suzuki's exquisite large-scale toner-etchings, created from a technique she originated. Using this process, she produced illusionistic three-dimensional spaces filled with resonance, in which forms appeared to possess specificity as energy-generating phenomena. Through their precise gestural qualities, scale and positioning within spatial fields of subtle tone, her works seemingly occupied both illusionistic pictorial space as well as the physical space of their viewers, thereby sharing the interrelated complexity of the same world. When she immigrated and became a permanent resident of Canada in 2006, the Canadian print community was very pleased to welcome her.

Her latest exhibition *Hope Chests* moves us to contemplate the lives and futures of girls within our contemporary world. First shown in Tokyo at the Canadian Embassy, Prince Takamado Gallery, this evolving project signals yet another extension of Suzuki's interests. Moved by circumstances often outside a child's and family's control, Suzuki focuses on the hopes and dreams of girls, and of their families for them. As Suzuki states, there is enormous potential for works conceived within the expanded field of contemporary printmaking to "make a connection to the lives of ordinary people." (Suzuki 2016)

*Hope Chests* is the first large-scale installation work Suzuki has produced. It comprises eight white silk tent-like structures supported with aluminum tubing, each of which houses a table on which a work is presented in a box. The installation includes a separate portrait of each girl combining digital and traditional print techniques, as well as a video of interviews with each girl and her parents. Each silk tent features a large image of one of the girls printed on its surface. This image is vertically split down the centre to enable participant/viewers entrance into the inner space of the structure where a large *kiri* box is displayed. The *kiri* box inside each of the eight silk structures is the size and type used to hold and protect a folded traditional Japanese *kimono*, and has connections to old customs in Japan in which such a box formed part of a bride's dowry. *Kiri* wood serves to protect against fire, humidity, and insects, and in this installation signals the need for protection of that which is valuable, namely the hopes, dreams and lives of all girls. The use of white silk in this installation is important for several reasons. It represents purity, innocence, and in Japan as well as Canada, wedding dresses are traditionally white, hinting at possible future dreams for the girls. The

white silk also has reference to Shinto, the ethnic religion of Japan. Shinto rituals serve to link the past and the present, and the use of white silk as a gate to an inner space may have reference to sites such as the *Ise Jingu* Grand Shrine of Japan, in which the second inner gate of the shrine, the *naiku*, is separated by “a curtain of pure white silk.”(Asquith 159) Also, there may be reference in this work to *Amaterasu*, Goddess of the Sun and supreme deity in Shinto, a strong female figure who today some believe images of may be viewed as “useful sources of healing in the spiritual modern life of modern Japan.”(Nakamura 248) The fabric and collage works in the boxes reference *kimonos*, with images printed using traditional and digital means. Suzuki incorporates specific images of the girls, and materials, colours, patterns, textures, and mythological references such as rabbits, monkeys, etc., corresponding to the inner feelings, thoughts and personalities of the girls.

As viewers of the installation make an individual passage into the silk enclosure, they become participants in the artwork. As their states of mind shift, they move from the everyday profane environment to a contemplative, respectful, and even sacred place of reflection on the dreams and futures of the girls. By focusing on individual girls from diverse cultures, Suzuki hopes to signal and represent a commonality in the hopes and dreams of girls everywhere, to help in “healing everyday life.” (Suzuki 2016) She is interested in encouraging girls at a critical time in their teen years, in a world fraught with conflict, natural and man-made occurrences, and gender disparities that disproportionately affect the lives of girls and women.<sup>1</sup> Suzuki began this series of works in the late 2000s when she was made aware of the plight of many children in Cambodia. One of the girls involved in this work was a victim of war in Cambodia, and now lives in Metro Vancouver; one is a survivor of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster and lives in Fukushima. Despite these challenges, Suzuki notes that the girls portrayed are now living happy lives. Three of the other girls live in Vancouver and three live in Japan. In choosing to focus on teenage girls and to present positive and thoughtful images of them, Suzuki’s complex installation quietly yet powerfully gives us hope that these girls—and indeed all girls—will be able to lead lives of equality that are free of suffering and violence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Ferris notes, “Natural disasters exacerbate existing gender inequalities and pre-existing vulnerabilities. The majority of those who die in natural disasters are women. Women also tend to have less access to essential resources for preparedness, mitigation, and rehabilitation; and the UN Human Rights Council report notes “Discrimination on the basis of gender increases the vulnerability of women and girls in emergency, post-disaster and post-conflict situations... Mechanisms to prevent gender-based violence, sexual harassment and rape have to be put in place (15).”

<sup>2</sup> Dean Beeby in summarizing the 2015 Draft Status of Women Canada report notes, “Canada is falling behind the developed world in women’s equality, as poverty rates climb for elderly single women and for single-parent families headed by women, says an internal report by Status of Women Canada. ... According to the report, this country is in the bottom ranks in terms of the pay gap between men and women; support for child care and parental leave is well below average; the country registers 57th for gender equality in Parliament’s elected members; and it lacks a national strategy to halt violence against women.”

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