

In Loving Memory of the Life and Work and Art of:



Sueko Kawamura
January 31, 1923 - February 27, 2021



Sueko Kawamura Gallery and Scholarship Donation

The Evanston Art Center is honored to receive a very generous bequest from Sueko Kawamura. In honor of this gift we are naming our second floor gallery, the "Sueko Kawamura Gallery." Everyone visiting the gallery will see the beautiful plaque and remember the special woman who donated the funds for this opportunity. We host 12 exhibitions a year in the gallery. Twenty artists will have the opportunity to exhibit in this wonderful space on an annual basis. The exhibitions include sculpture, 2-D artwork and installation pieces.

Additionally, the Evanston Art Center is honored to be the recipient of a very generous bequest from Sueko Kawamura to fund eight full scholarships a year for twenty-five years at the Evanston Art Center. These scholarships will be known as the Weighardt/Kawamura Scholarship. The scholarships will be provided to students who cannot afford the tuition, based on their financial situation. We will let each scholarship recipient know of Sueko Kawamura and her generous spirit.

- Paula Danoff, President & CEO of the Evanston Art Center



Sueko Kawamura was born on January 31st, 1923 in Shinto, China, as the fifth of six children, and at the age of 98, she died peacefully in her home in Chicago on February 27th, 2021, with her loving aid, Chona, at her side and her many friends cherishing their friendship with her.

Sueko had said her name means “Woman for All Seasons”, and she was truly that.

Although Sueko was only 4’9” tall, she was big in talent and in life force. She would often laugh at the idea of Japanese women being compliant. She personally had family issues and eschewed traditional Japanese dress and refused the concept of an arranged marriage. So as a single woman at age 37, she left Japan for the United States.

Upon her arrival in the United States in 1960, Sueko was accepted as a student at Chicago’s Art Institute, where she majored in painting and minored in sculpture, ultimately graduating in 1964.

At graduation, Sueko received the coveted prize from the Alumni Painters Association. She took a job as a hat check girl in a theater next to Second City to help her learn English. She loved plays and was a long time subscriber to the Steppenwolf Theater.

After graduation in 1964, until her retirement in 2000, she practiced her talent at Richard Rush Studios where she made architectural models for such projects as the John Hancock Building and the Sears Tower.

At the age of 77, she returned to her love of fine arts and continued working on her painting and sculpture. Sueko was a fixture at the Evanston Art Center where her many friends got to see the evolution of her talents as she developed a style of figure sculpting that was unique and visionary and her work was an inspiration to many.

Sueko once wrote to a friend: “World War II taught me flexibility, resilience and a wider perception. I was lucky that during the war, I was young and strong. Believe me, I understood American soldiers suffered as did the Japanese. I’m the lucky one, who was surrounded by” foreigners” since my childhood. I never developed prejudices against nationalities, ethnic groups or persons of color.”

Sueko was a woman of great talent and great dedication to her art and maintaining her many friendships and pushing her sculpting style as she worked well into her 90’s. Her life was extraordinary, her friends numerous and her accomplishments many.

Sueko had requested that her ashes be returned to Japan to lay in rest there and two close friends of Sueko, Josh and Rae, have each pledged to do that task on her behalf when travel abroad is once again possible.



Remembrances:



I have known Sueko Kawamura my whole life. My very first memories of her were punctuated by the glorious backdrop of Old Town in the 1960's. Patchouli and sandalwood filled the air and there was a sense of endless possibilities. Sueko became a fixture in our home and rapidly became a part of our family. Sueko was always an excellent and highly skilled artist, but to us, she was a friend, confidant, and all around "chum" (her term). We went to many places in the city together. Later we would travel to Sheridan, Missouri, Paris, and Barcelona. We would come to appreciate her artwork more and more over time. Practical and pragmatic, Sueko would make decisions about important life matters looking through a lens of sensibility.



Sueko was born of nobility into a Samurai class family in China where her father was on a diplomatic mission for the Japanese government, one of six children growing up with World War 2 brewing and then coming to fruition can not have been easy. To my recollection Sueko only spoke to us about the horrors of being bombed by the Allied forces once. Sueko's father was a diplomat and Sueko's mother had followed her father's path to become a physician trained in the Chinese school of medicine, however, as was the tradition, she set aside career aspirations to raise her family.



It would be fair to say that Sueko had an independent if not mischievous streak. A favorite story of her childhood was centered around a fruit tree that grew in her neighbors yard, but hung over the wall of the family compound. It should be noted that this occurred during World War Two, as a result food was scarce and expensive. Sueko would pick the fruit and enlist the help of a younger brother and perhaps egg him on to do so. At some point the woman who lived next door noticed, she made a point of coming to the front door of Sueko's family home with more fruit which was presented to Sueko's mother saying "if you are hungry and need fruit, here is some more," she did this in a rather backhanded manner, Sueko's mother was mortified, but Sueko's father was amused and actually proud of his daughter's gumption.



Later Sueko would continue to stir things up when she took a "respectable" job working in an upscale bank in downtown Tokyo. It was quickly discovered that customer service was not exactly in her wheelhouse and given the status of her family, firing her was out of the question, thus facilitating a transfer to the basement where she would check clients in and out of their safety deposit boxes. Shortly after this, Sueko left for America to study at the Art Institute of Chicago.



Sueko was Japanese through and through, an expert in all things cultural including the ability to wear and move about in a formal kimono “no small task,” perform the Tea Ceremony without a cheat sheet and draw calligraphy using a tray of ink and a horse hair brush. She also embraced becoming an American; she fully accepted the ideals of freedom and the American way of life. Less constrained by the fixed social caste system in Japan, she flourished. Sponsored by her employer, mentor and dear friend, Richard Rush, she became an American citizen. On the day of her swearing in, my mother, Barbara Steele, presented her with a custom made t-shirt that said “number one American Citizen”, she proudly wore it beyond the thread bare stage.

As a fixture in our home, Sueko, wishing to be close to our family, purchased her condominium at Sandburg Terrace. Interestingly, the westward city view looked straight down our street. Sueko, honoring her Japanese traditions, had hardwood floors and sliding Japanese shoji installed. Her personal space was bright and clean, interestingly, she refused to use the laundry provided by the building, but would do all her laundry by hand in the bathtub, which to her, “kept her hands strong for sculpture”.



As the years went by and age took its natural course, both Sueko and my mother, Barbara, started looking for an alternative living situation. Needing more support for all matters of day to day living issues, they choose to move to Brookdale, an adult independent and assisted senior community on Lake Shore Drive just south of Belmont Avenue. Sueko adapted well and enjoyed her new community, but for the most part maintained her independence focusing mostly on her art and friends. In the early years there, I would often pick up my Mom and Sueko to venture out into the city for lunches, dinners, theater outings and any number of fun activities.

Over time as physical illness took its toll it became more and more of a challenge to get Mom and Sueko out and about. There came a point where my Mother could no longer receive the care she required and had to be moved to a skilled nursing facility where she passed away three years prior to Sueko’s passing. In that time, I continued to see Sueko on a regular basis. We had many fine meals together with great conversation, oftentimes focusing on politics or Japanese culture. In the end COVID-19 took its course making it impossible to visit. We had several phone conversations. In the end I was able to visit Sueko while on her deathbed. We were both wearing masks as was the protocol. I held Sueko’s hand and pulled my mask down with the other so she could see my face. Sueko reached up with her free hand and pulled down her mask revealing the biggest smile I have ever seen from her. The message was clear, “I am joyful, at peace and ready to go”. Goodbye Sueko (SAYONARA) dear friend, Godspeed.



- Joshua Steele Rickabaugh







Sueko was feisty, opinionated, and one of the most talented artists it's been my pleasure to know. I, at first, knew her only peripherally and saw her at events at the Evanston Art Center, located on Sheridan road at that time. Sometimes I saw her in the Friday morning class at Noyes if I was there checking on a sculpture I'd had put out to dry. When I took over the Sunday sculpture workshop from Misha, she came on a regular basis.

One immediately noticed the energy she exhibited at all times. On arrival, the first thing she would do was to thoroughly clean the casting room. The second thing she would do was write a detailed note listing all the cleanup tasks she considered undone or not done adequately. (I once had an idea to take all those notes and save them and I'm sorry that I didn't follow through, they were instructive gems — only then would she begin to work on her own creations.)

During a conversation we were having about life in general Sueko stated that she could never be married. "I could not stand for a man to tell me what to do.", she said.

Years ago, after an informative trip to her workplace to see the process she used to cast clay sculptures in resin, we decided to have lunch, before returning to her home. She wanted an Asian restaurant and was familiar with all of them. We had to skip many of them because she stated that "I won't eat there because they belong to the Korean Mafia!" Whether that was true or not, or what that entailed or meant, I really had no idea.

I shouldn't really include this last story because I heard it 2nd or 3rd hand and really have no idea if it is true or not. The concept is so entertaining that I can't pass it up, either way. I was told that while taking a sculpture class with a newer, much younger instructor, attempting to get yet another perspective on her art, the instructor stopped and studied her unfinished work for several minutes without speaking. Sueko was at the time at least in her eighties. When he finally spoke, to the amazement of all, he said "You need to go out dancing all night, and loosen up a little." I don't know how she reacted to this but I do know she remained quite fond of him, so I gather she didn't take offense. I'm greatly amused whenever I imagine Sueko going out and following his advice!

I love these memories, but I'll really miss having her around.....

- Bill Anders





Remembrances of Sueko by Boruch Lev (Eugene)

Sueko and I met pretty soon after I joined the EAC. I was taking Sheila Oettinger's classes from 2003 to 2005. Working in the sculpture studio after class, you meet people from outside your own class. So, in this way I met Sueko, and for many hours there we were working side by side. It was interesting and involving to watch her work. She had to begin with a preliminary design in her mind from the very start of a project, yet she could significantly change that design even when the work was almost done if she wasn't satisfied, or found a better angle. Sometimes I would watch her work for a long time. Her dedication, her resilience and obviously, her style deeply affected my own art. Sueko didn't talk much, and her every remark was important. There was no empty talk. I watched her as she was preparing plaster, shaping her body-scapes and working on finishes. Now working on my own pieces, I remember things learned from Sueko. She worked until she achieved satisfaction or until she couldn't do it anymore. Then she laid down, relaxing at the podium at the center of the room, waiting until her pain goes down. Sometimes she made me proud, giving me a good critique. It seemed that she liked some of my pieces, and once she suggested an exchange. I happily agreed. It wasn't easy to choose from the pieces that she offered, as I loved them all. Once, I remember, I persuaded her to go to the ACA show on a bike! I have a special customized bike, built in combination with a wheel chair and we took it on a ride to the art show at one of Northwestern pavilions. It was so much fun and Sueko was laughing, which didn't happen too often. Another time she asked to go with me to the stalls at Golf and Harms. I was working on a horse piece and needed a good reference and Sueko just wanted to sketch. Working there in the stalls, we realized how different horses are. Not one had the same face. I was obviously growing as an artist, working by Sueko's side, and in 2016 we put on a two-sculptor exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center entitled "Clay grounds". It was a huge honor to stand on those grounds together, with Sueko!





From Sally Lupel and Rachel Dose:

Sueko joined our Friday Sculpture class full time when she retired.

Trip to Mr. Rush's Studio to show us what she did and what the whole studio did, especially a dinosaur and a volcano that was actually going to erupt, being sent to Asia for a display.

During figure sculpture, she worked skillfully and quickly – Being particularly careful with finishing touches. Sueko worked both in fired clay and in cast pieces. She was generous with her help for anyone who asked.



She was a real trooper. Even when she could hardly walk, she came to class and our Friday lunches, riding the Pace bus to and from her apartment, which sometimes brought her here very late, as she wouldn't spend the money to splurge on a cab. She wanted her money to go to the Chicago Art Institute and the Evanston Art Center as well as many individuals when she passed away.

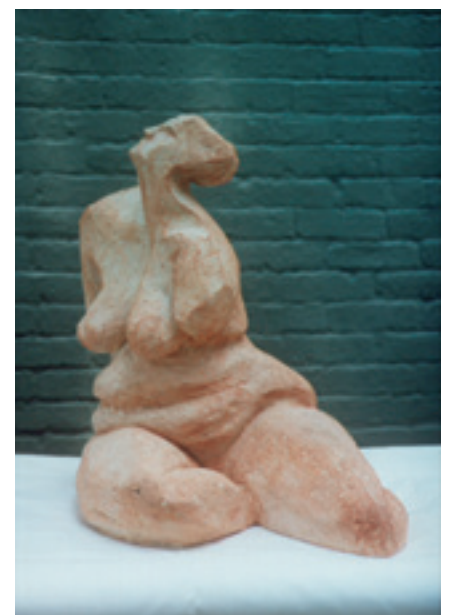
She loved to take the whole class to Japanese Restaurants for Friday lunch. She was very particular about sushi being made correctly.

From Jessica Feith:

Sueko was proud of being a very independent individual. She brightened when telling me about how she came to the U.S. on her own and her work at the Rush Studio.

During the last couple of years that she was in the sculpture studio, it was wonderful and inspiring to see her working. She found inventive ways to accommodate the continuation of her work. She would set up several stools as tables to hold clay and tools and would be surrounded on all sides by her sculpture stand and everything she needed so that she could remain seated on a very low stool as she worked. And if she dropped a tool and it was a little out of reach, she always had a friend nearby to pick it up for her. Many times it was happily me.





I met Sueko many years ago when we both lived in Sandburg Village, she in the Bryant House and me, across the street, in Lowell House. I first saw her work then when she donated her sculpture "Silent Conversation" to Bryant House.

We did a lot of things together, lunches, dinners and the Sandburg Book Club. I also drove her to doctor appointments, grocery shopping, etc. As she got older she needed some help.

Sueko moved to Brookdale Lake View at 3121 N. Sheridan. She was still able to go out with friends and we had dinner many times at the Brookdale dining room. On Sunday's, I would pick her up and take her to my place to watch a movie.

As time went on it was harder and harder for her to go out. She had a walker and had moved into the assisted living section of the Brookdale. She hired 24-hour nurses and a tax preparer to do her bills, etc.

She was getting older over time and passed away comfortably in her sleep at the age of 98.

- Friend and former Trustee, Karen Sonderby



I have known Sueko through the Evanston Art Center for over 20 years and I was always amazed at her stamina and enthusiasm and focus on her work. Her individual style evolved over the years and her more abstract interpretation of the figure was an inspiration to me and many others.

In 2017, I met Karen Sonderby who had been acting as trustee for Sueko, and we were able to arrange some eventual 24/7 care for Sueko and encourage her to move into the assisted living portion of the Brookdale.

She eventually agreed to make the move, although she continued to called Marv, the mover, to have her stuff picked backed up and moved back to her old apartment, which she kept for an extra three months, but she finally settled in to the her assisted living apartment overlooking Lake Michigan with her devoted caretaker, Chona, for two more wonderful years and was well taken care of by the great staff at Brookdale and house calls from her dedicated friend and physician, Dr. O'Connor.

My friend, Maria Winter, worked with Warren Lupel, who had taken on the role of Trustee from Karen, and she and Karen helped make sense of all Sueko's bookkeeping; and Sueko was able to finally relax and enjoy the visits and phone calls from of her many friends and continued to enjoy herself at Brookdale, until she passed peacefully.

Many thanks to all who have stayed in touch and cared for Sueko along the way; she is missed, but her creative and generous spirit lives on in the beautiful sculpture she has created as well as the Scholarship and Gallery in her name at the Evanston Art Center.

- Mike Dillon





“Woman For All Seasons”