

24 HIROSHI SUNAIRI



Memento Mori for New York

BARBARA LONDON

On September 11, 2001 at 9:15 AM, Hiroshi Sunairi sat in an A train stalled at the Church Street Station, anxiously wondering why the doors remained shut. Suddenly a woman appeared on the platform, screaming and gesticulating wildly. He assumed, "Oh, another crazy New Yorker." Sunairi could only think about how late he would now be for his immigration appointment with the INS. When the subway doors finally opened, he sprinted up the stairs toward his destination. Of course he never made it to the meeting, becoming entangled in the melee on the street (Pl. 24.2). Ignoring policemen's attempts to stop him, he reached the destruction site and captured the flying debris and billowing devastation with the fresh film that happened to be in his camera.

Sunairi's first-hand experience with the World Trade Center disaster resonated with childhood memories. For several decades, his prosperous-again hometown of Hiroshima has had a bifurcated public face, most visibly with the new shiny buildings standing next to shards of old ones. Although he is two generations removed

from the fateful event, as a Hiroshima dweller the history of horror and destruction was imprinted on him. Since childhood he saw the influx of international crowds making annual pilgrimages to demonstrate for peace, as they gathered at the iconic site memorializing August 6, 1945.

At 18, Sunairi left Japan to pursue art in the United States. After his BA he moved to New York and became a denizen of the downtown club scene. Freer than he ever could have been in hierarchical Japan, he moved from painting to photography and then to performance (that interdisciplinary forum of new ideas). He approached identity politics through trans-gendering, drawing on the sensibility of Noh and Kabuki, where men dress and masquerade as female characters while still retaining the dignity of their masculinity. He focused on "enlightening" the role of Asian men and wanted to project empowerment of the Asian male in his art. His campy, geisha-like demeanor attracted a following, but he felt that his political intentions were misunderstood and decided

PLATE 24.1

Hiroshi Sunairi
White Elephant (miniature model)
 2007
 Clay
 Height: 1 ½–6" (3.8–15.2 cm)
 Collection of the artist
 PHOTO: TAKAHIRO KANEYAMA

to go beyond the narcissistic tendency in art to something more universal but personally felt.

In 2005 Sunairi returned to his hometown, invited to do a workshop with students and to create a new installation for the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. While beginning this work he discovered that his mother was irradiated by the atomic bomb when in her mother's womb. (This type of irradiation is called *tainai hibaku* in Japanese.) He was closer to the event than he realized. Sunairi focused on elephants, inspired by the saying that "elephants never forget" and the storybook legend that the animals have the ability to find their way back to their birthplace. Sunairi went off to do preliminary research in India, where elephants are considered offshoots of a god, not friendly Dumbos or zoo or circus animals as viewed in Japan and the West. To a small child, the actual colossi are closer to monsters, sometimes frightening because of their imposing scale.

Sunairi's installation in Hiroshima, *A Night of Elephants*, became a community art project (Pl. 24.3). Based on the drawings he did in India, he designed a mesh cage in the shape of a life-size, recumbent elephant. He spent the next several months working with locals, collecting *hibaku*, or irradiated, objects: a leather

backpack once owned by an elementary schoolgirl who perished in the bombing, wooden walls from a demolished gymnasium, a skirt stained by ointment that soothed a young woman's wounds, and tattered, abandoned socks. Sunairi also worked with local gardeners, who provided prunings from trees that miraculously survived the bombing. He then filled the elephant cage with the cut branches and displayed the other objects along the back wall of the gallery, each with its own memories and history. The scruffiness gives the work a humble charm.

Sunairi's latest work, *White Elephant* (2007), is made of porcelain (Pl. 24.1). The life-size adolescent elephant's body has been broken down into many parts. Viewers are free to walk around the apparition and confront the wizened units: the large head, stumpy feet, and amphora legs. The behemoth feels domesticated and controllable. Arranged across the floor, the elephant resembles a still life, and elicits ruminations on life and death and regeneration.

Hiroshi Sunairi's thoughts take him back to the morning of 9/11, when his clothing turned gray with dust and he gasped for breath as debris floated from the sky. The impermanence of life remains on Sunairi's mind in this memento mori, a memorial to Manhattan by an artist who draws inspiration from being rooted to New York.



PLATE 24.2

Susan Meiselas
New York, September 11, 2001
(Sunairi: foreground, second from right)
2001

Color photograph
© SUSAN MEISELAS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

When and how did you first realize that you wanted to be an artist?

HS: I grew up with a sign company my parents owned. So, the scene of production was naturally my playground. I used to draw the Disney animation *101 Dalmatians* to get attention from people in my preschool. Then I had a vague idea about being an artist. But, then, one day I discovered the biography of Andy Warhol. When I read the book, I became fascinated with Warhol and Pop Art. It hit me strongly that art could be as fluid as music.

Why did you choose New York as your ultimate destination?

HS: I lived in Utah, Washington State, then upstate New York, enjoying the different cultures, landscapes, and people over some time. But I knew that ultimately I wanted to come to New York. I wanted to get in the middle of the hybrid culture that New York was famous for.

What experience has given you the most satisfaction as an artist in New York?

HS: When Roberta Smith wrote an article on me in the *New York Times*, which really dealt with the progress of my artmaking in such a caring way. It really moved me and I realized that someone out there was watching me.

In this age of globalism, do you consider yourself to be a Japanese artist, an American artist, an international artist, or a hybrid of all three?

HS: I am a Japanese artist living in New York, an artist who was educated in American art, an artist who exhibited in the West all at the same time. I experience globalism, migration, and the international art world in fragments just as I am partly all of a Japanese artist, an American artist, and an international artist. I experience rather unique encounters because of the particularity of my work, so it has been such a liberating experience to be where I am.





PLATE 24.3

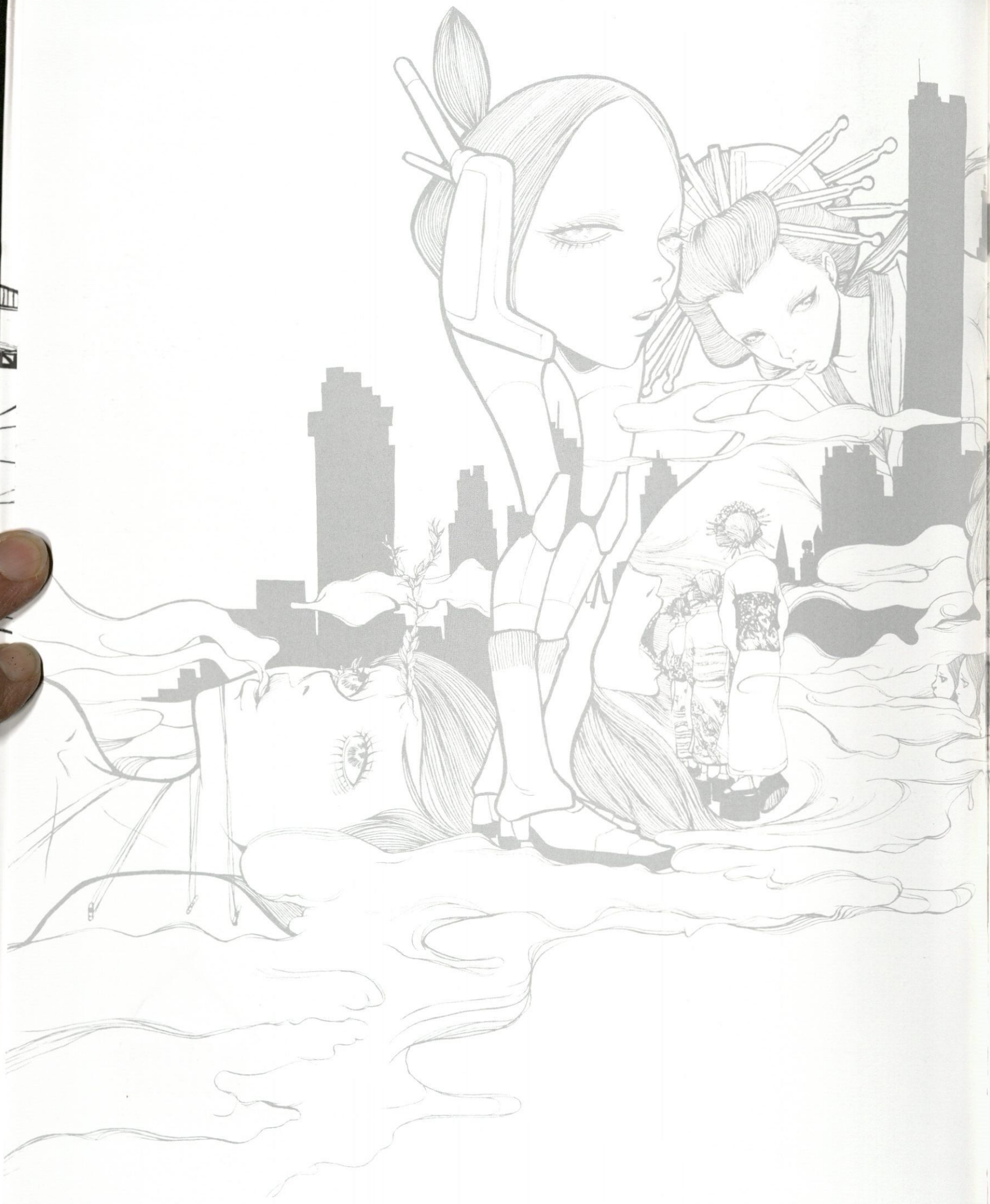
Hiroshi Sunairi
A Night of Elephants
 2005

Elephant: steel, metal board, Japanese Hackberry trees, *kuroganemochi* trees, and *muku* trees; elephant foot: ceramic; *hibaku* objects: leather backpack, wooden walls, a woman's skirt, and a little boy's sock

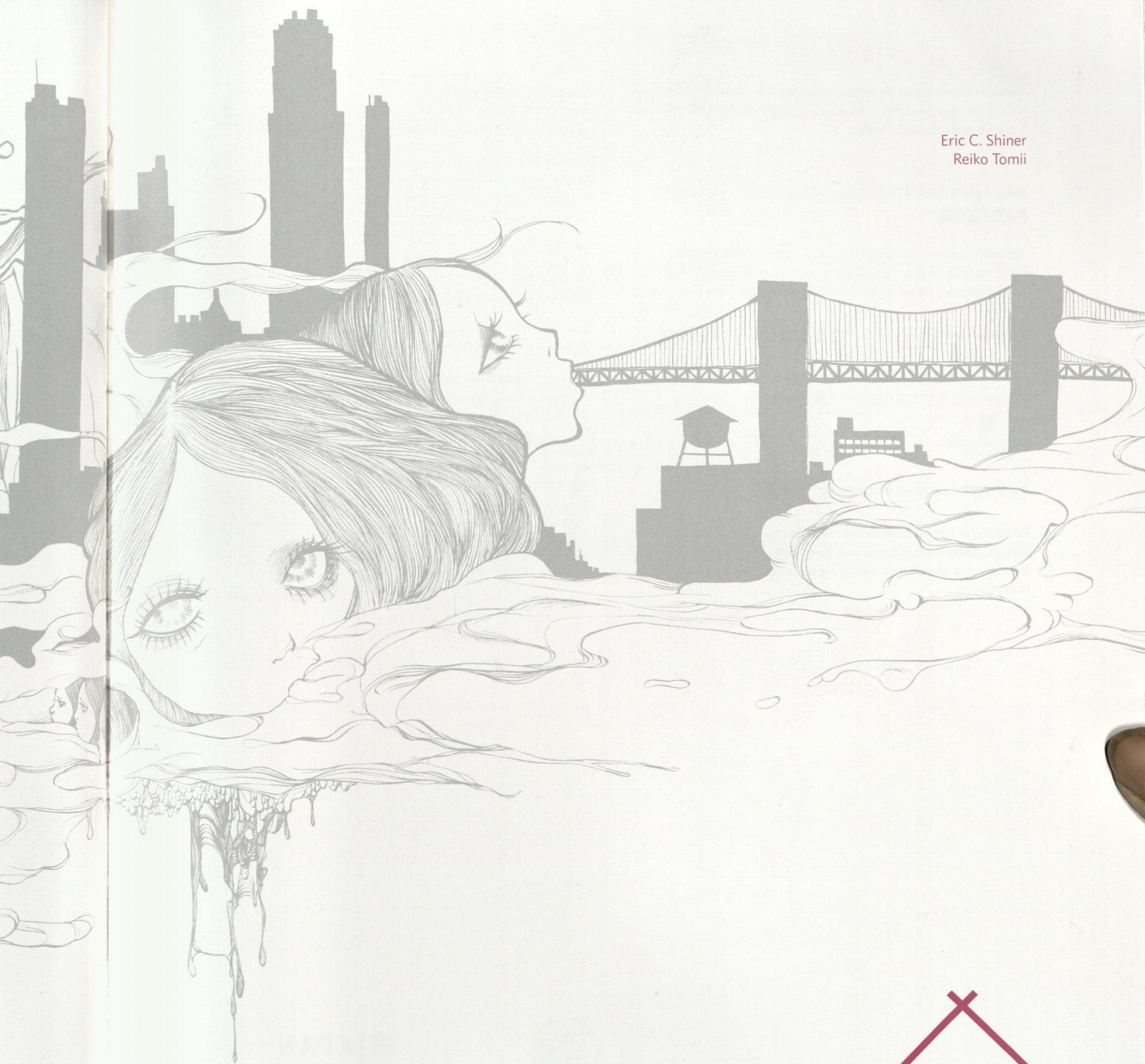
Elephant: 39 3/8 x 118 3/8 x 196 7/8" (1 x 3 x 5m); elephant foot: each 15 x 15 x 15" (38.1 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Collection of the artist

PHOTO: OSHIMA STUDIO, HIROSHIMA



Eric C. Shiner
Reiko Tomii



**MAKING
A HOME**

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Rand Castile (1971-1986)
Anthony Derham (1986-1989)
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whose service to the Gallery and
commitment to Japanese art and artists were exemplary.

It is also dedicated to
all Japanese artists in New York City, past, present, and future,
whose struggles and achievements are part of our history.