Tamiko Kawata: *Together II* — Interview

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Sofia Thiệu (ST): We're sitting here in Alison Bradley Projects as this monumental installation, *Together II*, is being built. We just produced some lines of safety pins together. The room is completely immersive—the work spans all four gallery walls and envelops you. Can you tell me about the concept behind this installation and how it began?

Tamiko Kawata (TK): *Together II (Waterfall)* is a site-specific installation and the main part of my solo show for Alison Bradley Projects, composed of a ten-foot by sixty-three inch installation across four walls. It consists of about 2,000 lines of No. 3 safety pins, with 80 pins per each ten-foot line.

ST: It's remarkable—and also your newest project, and a collaborative effort. How did you decide to work with community members?

TK: That was the part that surprised me. Claire, the gallery's Director and Curator, organized the installation and suggested holding workshops to help create the pin chains. The technique is simple—a six-year-old could do it—but I needed thousands of lines in a short time. Claire kept the idea moving, and then I had my annual open studio at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts. I told visitors about the project, and to my surprise many people showed up to help.

ST: So for two weeks before the opening, volunteers came to workshops in the West Chelsea building to link safety pins into ten-foot chains—completely voluntarily. People really showed up for you!

TK: It became a real community. People enjoyed the process of making something together. When they finished, I'd thank them for their time and they'd say, "No, thank *you*." New friendships were created. Some people hadn't seen one another in years and reconnected during the workshops. We had students, friends, people who knew my work, and people who found us online. I learned a lot from that collaborative energy.

The installation continues from *Together I*, a project I made at White Box in 2020, right after the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. It was such a joyful moment. I made a pantyhose installation—90 by 12 feet—each pair stretched in a gesture of celebration, and another work dedicated to Kamala Harris. I felt the country had been threatened with division, but instead there was joy. So with *Together II*, I wanted to gather people again.

The safety-pin technique is simple, but I taught everyone the most efficient method. The workshops were cheerful, and I felt we were generating a shared energy—the power of being together—which the installation expresses.

ST: It's beautiful. And it's interesting that *Together I* emerged from a celebratory moment for the Biden presidency, while *Together II* comes during 2025—a difficult moment marked by xenophobia and

rollbacks on gender policies. This iteration feels more about personal resilience. Political and social awareness runs through your practice.

TK: Yes—especially in my installations, there is always social and political commentary. And they're made from used materials because that comes from my immigration experience. When I arrived in the US from post-war Japan, the first thing I noticed was, "What a plentiful but wasteful lifestyle." It shocked me.

My first night in the US was actually still on the boat—we arrived too late for immigration to process us—sleeping under the Golden Gate Bridge. I watched the traffic lights shine all night across the Bay. The next morning, the pastel-colored houses on the cliffs looked like toy houses—pretty, but so regulated. Even shopping was shocking: a drugstore that sold food, clothing, shoes all in one place. Life here was abundant, and wasteful. Those impressions stayed with me. As an artist, it became a subject—my way of writing my American narrative in three-dimensional form.

ST: We're in another fraught political moment now, especially around immigration. When you first came to San Francisco in the 1960s, was the visa process different?

TK: Very different. My father had been invited to teach in Washington, DC, and he traveled on an official Japanese government passport. Our whole family received those passports, which meant we were protected by the Japanese government—but I couldn't work or study.

Someone gave me a recommendation letter to the Japanese trade department in New York, in case I wanted to stay longer. At the time, we were only allowed to take $400 into the US—barely enough to live on, it would last us only three months. That letter became essential.

ST: Even with an official passport, you were limited to $400?

TK: Yes. After arriving in San Francisco, we eventually went to DC. I spent six months attending "Americanization School" every evening to learn English. Then I went to New York. The trade organization hired me right away. The position was Arts and Crafts Curator as I was working for a glass company as an Artist Designer in Tokyo upon the graduation of BA in sculpture.

ST: And once in New York, who became your community—both socially and artistically?

TK: At first, I hardly knew anyone. I stayed with a family friend in Brooklyn while looking for housing. My workplace had a tight Japanese community and helped me find a women's residence hall. It was safe, inexpensive, and close to work. It also immersed me in American culture—St. Patrick's Day, the Oscars, social events.

Through work, I met many American craft artists. I organized exhibitions both introducing Japanese art to the US and American design to Japan. I specialized in tableware and selected pieces that later would enter MoMA's collection, for example.

ST: And you also had artistic connections from Japan.

TK: Yes, the artist Shigeko Kubota and I actually studied at the same university and climbed mountains together, including a winter trip to Mount Fuji. After we both ended up in New York, we reconnected by chance at a performance. We cooked together and saw each other often. But she was with Fluxus, while my influences were more Bauhaus and Dada—Duchampian ideas about materials and alternative ways of thinking.

ST: So your work was conceptually aligned but distinct.

TK: Very distinct. My early work was more technical—plaster, bronze, wood. But I've always looked for alternative ways of approaching ordinary materials. The safety pins are part of that.

ST: And who else shaped your artistic life in New York?

TK: After I met my husband Ian, we went out a lot—to jazz clubs, galleries. Myself coming from post-war Japan, and he from the UK, New York felt so vibrant, colorful, and abundant. I recorded visual impressions constantly, and many became works—often using recycled materials to show accumulation. For a group show, I used five weeks of *Newsday* newspapers to create a waterfall form.

I've also been at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts since 2002. I never had the funds to study art in the US in the '60s, so EFA became an important learning community.

ST: And now *Together II*—an enormous project. There are additional works in the show as well. Can you speak about them?

TK: Yes. In the back office, there's a drawing of the original installation design in silver ink on black paper, and *Day and Night*, from the *Safety Pin Permutation* series. I'm also showing my new *Tamigraphs*: camera-less photographic images using objects from my sculptures—mostly safety pins—to create three-dimensional effects on a flat surface. They're very new and experimental.

Next door, there's *Waves* from my *Permutation* series, and an older piece, *Flat Iron Building*, a triangular woven safety-pin mesh that opens into an unexpected space when undone. There's also a caterpillar-nest sculpture from 1968—a playful piece I made at my first residency, trying to overcome my phobia of caterpillars.

And several chewing-gum works. As a child during the war, American GIs gave us shiny silver-wrapped chewing gum—so I had positive associations. But once I immigrated, I saw all the black gum marks on the subway floors, stuck to shoes. I became interested in the gum's "sad side"—its relationship to anxious energy. This inspired *Sidewalk Elegy*, made of cement and acrylic on canvas.

So yes, the show spans early works to the newest experiments. But the centerpiece is *Together II*: *Waterfall.*

ST: It's almost like a survey show as well as a major new installation.

TK: Many of my shows become survey shows, because my work is like a diary.

ST: *Together II* continues your waterfall motif. What does the waterfall symbolize for you?

TK: It comes from my years hiking in Japan—seeing small streams growing larger, moving around rocks and branches, eventually joining the ocean. To me, it mirrors life: we're born, we move through obstacles, and eventually we join our ancestors. Japan is surrounded by water; I grew up surrounded by it. It's another shape of life.

ST: And Manhattan is also an island. The waterfall as a political motif is powerful. What do you hope people feel when they see the show?

TK: I hope they feel the collaborative energy. These small lines—small veins—grow into something larger. Claire organized the workshops, and in just nine days, about 130 people helped create roughly 2,000 lines. We used every single one. I feel their energy in the work.

We're living in an uncertain time. Trump has won another term. There is tension and global turmoil. I'm grateful for the chance to capture this moment through the waterfall form. I hope this work encourages a sense of togetherness—a vision for a calmer, more peaceful society.