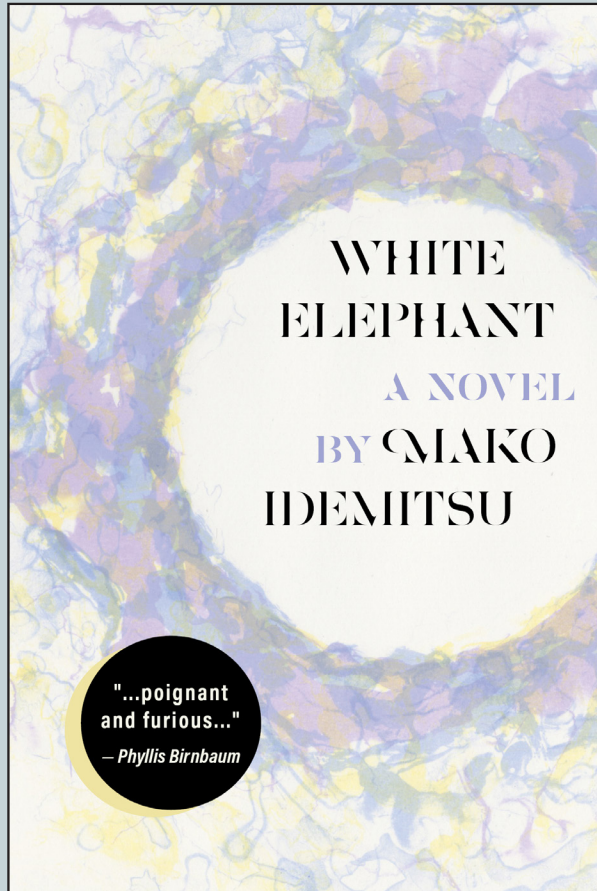


# WORLD-RENOWNED JAPANESE VISUAL ARTIST MAKO IDEMITSU MAKES ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEBUT



With a deeply-imbedded indebtedness to their father Morimasa Morimoto, a self-made man in post-war Japan, two sisters struggle to uphold a family legacy. Sakiko moves to the fantastically free United States. Fragile and unsure in 1960s San Francisco, she clings to her brazen artist husband for stability. Hiroko, headstrong and irreverent, uses her father's money to move to New York, promising to become a famous artist. Intolerant of weakness in others, she crumbles in the face of her own shortcomings.

From catty carpooling moms to manipulative stoners, abortions to adultery, *White Elephant* is a vivid book from a seasoned artist turned writer. Mako Idemitsu, daughter of Rockefeller-esque petroleum executive Sazo Idemitsu, reconfigures her own family discord to reflect on the binds of being female in this gorgeous English translation.

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"Idemitsu has written an autobiographical first novel about a young Japanese woman who comes to America to study and stays to marry, raise a child, and find her identity as a woman caught between two cultures."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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# About the Author



Born in Tokyo in 1940, **Mako Idemitsu** was raised in a wealthy Japanese family. Her father, Sazo Idemitsu, was a prominent figure in the Japanese petroleum industry and a noted art collector. In 1963, she immigrated to the United States to attend Columbia University where she met and married abstract expressionist painter Sam Francis. Estranged from her family and raising two kids in California, she became disillusioned with the roles of wife and mother and picked up an 8mm camera. She left Francis and became a pioneer in experimental video and the feminist art movement of the 1970s.

Her work doggedly examines the nature of being a woman at the level of the family. Her dreamy and offputting videos caricature domestic dysfunction through melodrama and experimentation. Some of her work includes *Another Day of a Housewife* (1977) in which a woman is shown at home doing household work, while a large television set depicting an enlarged eye looks on, and *Hideo Dear, It's Your Mother* (1983) in which a mother fusses over a video screen broadcasting an image of her son sloppily eating breakfast as if he were physically there. Throughout her career she developed what is known as "Mako Style": depicting two realities simultaneously by embedding a video screen within a video screen.

Internationally acclaimed, she has been featured in major museums worldwide including New York's MOMA (now included in their permanent collection), LA's MOCA, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and more. *White Elephant* parlays her experienced eye as a visual artist to the written word creating a quietly complex novel with the unmistakable narrative touch of an experimental filmmaker.

"While waging the battle against society, many women must also fight against the memory, or the enemy, within themselves, of the discipline and teaching they received as children to constantly 'act like a girl.'"  
—Mako Idemitsu

# About the Translator



**Juliet Winters Carpenter** has translated the works of Abe Kobo, Fumiko Enchi, Machi Tawara, Junichi Watanabe, and Minae Mizumura, among many others. The acclaimed translator studied at the University of Michigan and the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies in Tokyo. She is a professor at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts in Kyoto.

Her translation of Abe Kobo's *Secret Rendezvous* won the 1980 Japan-US Friendship Commission Prize for the Translation of Japanese Literature and again in 2015 for her translation of Minae Mizumura's *A True Novel*, a loose retelling of *Wuthering Heights* set in post-war Japan. She is the first person to have won this honor twice.

## Also Available

By Mako Idemitsu

*What a Woman Made: Autobiography of a Filmmaker* (Iwanami Shoten, 2003)

## Select Translations by Juliet Winters Carpenter

*The Ark Sakura* by Abe Kobo

*Secret Rendezvous* by Abe Kobo

*The Hunter* by Nonami Asa

*Masks* by Enchi Fumiko

*Shadow Family* by Miyabe Miyuki

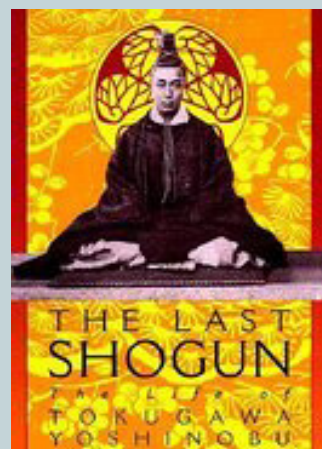
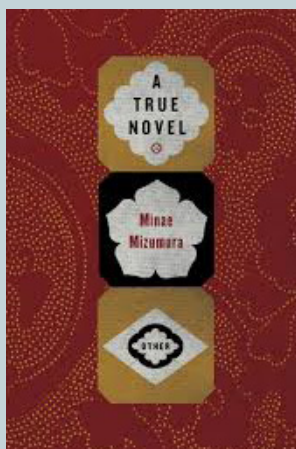
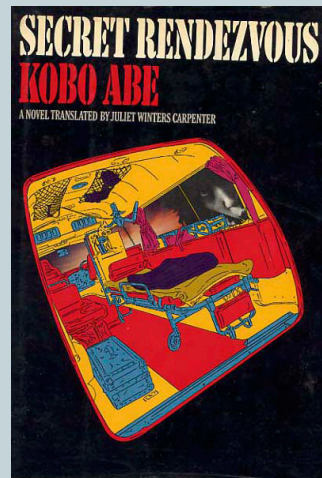
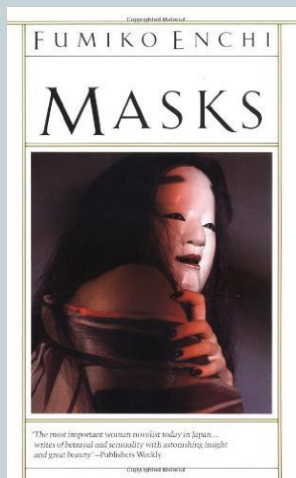
*A Lost Paradise* by Watanabe Jun'ichi

*A Capella* by Koike Mariko

*A True Novel* by Minae Mizumura

*Once Upon a Time in Japan*

co-translated with Roger Pulvers



# Critical Praise

## Praise for *White Elephant*

“Idemitsu has written an autobiographical first novel about a young Japanese woman who comes to America to study and stays to marry, raise a child, and find her identity as a woman caught between two cultures...leaves a bitter aftertaste of unresolved anger.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“This novel follows a fiercely troubled family across generations and continents, from Japan’s postwar struggles to economic recovery, and on to identity crises...Here we have an hysterical mother, a rich, domineering father, and sisters torn apart by sexual betrayal. Their search for reconciliation, at once poignant and furious, comes alive in a translation by the always superb Juliet Winters Carpenter.”

—Phyllis Birnbaum, author of *Modern Girls, Shining Stars, the Skies of Tokyo: Five Japanese Women*

## Praise for Mako Idemitsu

“Idemitsu’s distinctiveness lies in the way she keeps one foot in reality from which many female artists have fled and turns it into popular yet critical works.”

—Yuko Hasegawa, *Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*

“Mako Idemitsu made one of the most remarkable, coherent, and courageous works in the history of art and video.” —*Videoformes*

“Idemitsu’s oeuvre derives from the fact that the intersecting roles that her characters struggle with—artist, mother, and wife—are roles she herself has occupied, allowing her films to resonate as both intimate discourse and social critique.”

—Cornelia Butler, *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*

“Idemitsu’s films never simply gloss over the subject; they are unapologetic and spirited statements.”

—Tadao Sato, *Video Salon Magazine*

“None of the hysterics associated with the word feminism are visible here. What you will find instead is the will to calmly observe the world as seen through one person’s eyes.”

—Masuyama Ren, *Shinbun Akahata Newspaper*

“Idemitsu Mako is practically the only artist in Japan who has consistently produced a body of work from a feminist perspective...she illustrates the actual situation of women unconsciously oppressed by the patriarchal system which prevails in every social system in Japan.”

—**Keiko Tamaki**, *Winds of the Media from Asia*

“A traditional melodrama frames the character’s conflicts as personal problems, the problems of individuals. In contrast, Idemitsu’s narratives, with their consciously stereotypical situations and the visual commentary presented in the inner monitors, pose the problems as social: conflicts unavoidable in a society where women are for the most part restricted to rocking the cradle.”

—**Micki McGee**, *The Independent*

“...Mako Idemitsu is the only female video artist concerned with the psychological makeup of the Japanese woman from a female perspective. Her primary concern is to encourage an awareness of the Japanese woman’s situation, which is dictated by traditional expectations, and through this awareness bring about a needed change.”

—**Joanne Yamada**, *Image Forum*

“Mako Idemitsu’s latest video works, at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, reflect [a] soap-opera state of contextual disjunctiveness. Her conscious layering of archetypes and behavioral patterns from daily Japanese home life allows her works to take on the attributes of a dream.”

—**Bruce Yonemoto**, *Artweek*

## **Praise for Juliet Winters Carpenter**

“...one of the best-known literary translators from Japanese to English, who has won praise for her ability to channel the voices of Japanese writers into readable, often colloquial English and yet somehow retain their distinctive style.” — *The Japan Times*

“...[promotes] contemporary Japanese authors (including Minae Mizumura, Noboru Tsujihara, and Ryōtarō Shiba) to English readers by rendering their distinctive prose into precise yet colloquial English.” — *Asymptote*

“A riveting tale of doomed lovers set against the backdrop of postwar Japan...Mizumura’s ambitious literary and cultural preoccupations do not overwhelm the sheer force of her narrative or the beauty of her writing (in an evocative translation by Juliet Winters Carpenter.)”

— **Review of *A True Novel***, *New York Times Book Review*

# Suggested Q&A

## For Juliet Winters Carpenter\*

As a translator you've taken on the massive work of Ryotaro Shiba while also bringing to light contemporary fiction like that of Minae Mizumura. How do you select your projects? Do you prefer translating contemporary or historical work? What brought you to Mako Idemitsu's novel?

In an interview with *The Japan Times* it was mentioned that you like to focus on a key phrase in your translations (Japan coming together as a country for the first time in the Meiji period in Ryotaro Shiba's work for example). What do you see as a key theme you sought to preserve in *White Elephant*?

Your involvement with the Japanese Literature Publishing Project has already produced a huge amount of works in translation but there's a lot out there. Who are the writers you'd most love to see in translation whose work isn't yet available in English?

How much background information about Japanese culture do you think a reader of *White Elephant* might need to access the undercurrent of the text? Assuming your reader is totally ignorant of Japan, how do you tackle the cultural divide in your translations?

With a debut English translation like this there's a lot of freedom to interpret the author's voice. You're known for your ability to create graceful translations that are colloquial rather than wordy. Where do you draw the line between maintaining the integrity of the author's style and injecting your own?

## For Mako Idemitsu\*

As a longtime visual artist, what drew you to write a novel? How did the process differ from your video production projects?

There's a lot of shared themes in your creative work, especially a fascination with the roles women inhabit (mother, daughter, sister). Do you identify yourself explicitly as a feminist artist?

Your family has a prominent presence not only in *White Elephant* but in the Japanese public eye. The bestselling Japanese historical novel *A Man Called Pirate* featured your father as a major protagonist and won the Japanese Bookseller Award in 2013. How do you reconcile the public narrative from your private recollection of your upbringing?

In a powerful passage Sakiko waffles between her more confident alter ego, Yuko, and herself, reminiscent of the ways women fight against the behavioral expectations of women and by extension themselves. How did you go about conceptualizing Sakiko's and Hiroko's character?

The effects of World War II on Japan ripple throughout the novel. Your recent installation *The Past Ahead* similarly engages in the way history informs the future. Did *The Past Ahead* and *White Elephant* influence each other? What did you hope to convey about the cost of war in both works?

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