

Sarioglu, Ayse. "Robert Kobayashi at Susan Inglett," *Whitehot Magazine*, 29 October 2025.



Lily Koppel once called Robert Kobayashi "an artist of the street and quiet reticence (*NYTimes*, 1.20.09), and today his tins, rusted boxes, and small objects at Susan Inglett continue to dialogue silently with the words of the curator, his daughter, Misa Kobayashi. This retrospective offers an invisible bridge between a father's silence and his daughter's voice. Sometimes, an artist leaves behind not only works of art but a tradition of silence.

Ayse Sarioglu: Your father's works always seem to contain a contradiction: soft from afar, sharp up close. Do you think this mirrored his personality?

Misa Kobayashi: Absolutely. From a distance, he could seem distant, even cold. But once you approached, behind the walls he built, there was immense softness. His art reversed this: peaceful from afar, dangerous up close. In shaping metal, he was forging his own armor—both to protect and to express.

AS: There's a trace of the past in his creative process. Do you think his art was a search for healing?

Kobayashi: Yes. His greatest wound was the loss of his sister. She was the one who first encouraged him to be an artist. She died from a brain tumor, in a charity hospital where no one could help. At that moment, he felt powerless—and that sense of helplessness stayed with him for life. The guilt in the busts he made of her is palpable. Every sculpture was perhaps a letter of apology. And yes, I think art was his way of seeking forgiveness.

AS: Transforming Moe's Meat Market into a gallery was a bold move. What did that space mean to him?

Kobayashi: He always kept distance from crowds. He disliked the idea of "being seen" in the art world. So he said, "I'll open my own gallery"—and he did. The former butcher shop remained almost unchanged: cold tiles, iron hooks, the sharp scent of the floor. The space's memory seeped into his paintings. In a way, the gallery wasn't just a place to show art—it was a way to hide while being visible. It was radical, yet also a form of surrender: speaking to his past more than to the world.

AS: What was it like growing up surrounded by your father's art?

Kobayashi: Our home was more laboratory than house. His studio was next to my room. Walls didn't reach the ceiling. At night, I fell asleep to the sound of metal. Morning light filled the room, highlighting the edges of his paintings. He built little doors for cats, ladders, even a toy airplane for my grandfather. Years later, after my grandmother passed, we found that airplane, delicate yet sturdy. He walked the line between a work of art and a gesture of love. I realized then: I hadn't lived in a home but inside a work of art.

AS: In preparing this exhibition, what role did you assume? Curator or daughter?

Kobayashi: Neither. I was an archivist. A silent detective. Inside forgotten boxes, I found "lost" works: airplanes, cat paintings, model houses, unfinished sketches. All were stories. I wanted to include in the exhibition the things he called "not art." Because to me, no one else could draw that line. The airplane became art simply because it was made from love.

AS: There's a marked difference between his oil paintings and tin works. How do you define these periods?

Kobayashi: Oils were joyful, even humorous. Cats, toys, bright colors. ...But after 1996—starting with "The Cat and the Tie"—everything changed. He turned to metal. Dot by dot, every surface demanded infinite patience. Perhaps he no longer wanted to speak, only to look, only to place each point. I call it "the language of silence." Each stroke was like a breath.

AS: What did his return to Hawaii represent after falling ill?

Kobayashi: A kind of completion. Doctors said "weeks," yet he lived three years. Under the sun, smelling his childhood, he painted. I saw his first metal works there. He wanted to end where he began, to reconcile with his roots, to forgive the past. Even death seemed like an art performance—light, warmth, silence, farewell.

AS: What do you miss most about him?

Kobayashi: His voice. The strangest thing about losing someone is realizing you can never hear their voice in a new conversation again. Sometimes, at night, writing, I feel his breath within a sentence. Writing has become my prayer. Even in absence, a daughter continues to speak with her father.

AS: His signature farewell—"Take it easy, kid"—seems almost like a mantra. Do you feel this phrase reflected his approach to both life and art? How did he navigate the tension between effort and ease?

Kobayashi: One of the things I remember most vividly about my father was his signature send-off: "Take it easy, kid." He said it leaving dinners, to visitors he hadn't seen in a long time, to people older and younger than him. It was one of the last things he said to me in person before he died.

It was always his way of saying goodbye without actually saying goodbye. And yet, the irony is that my father never really took life easy. He worked with a meticulous, almost obsessive intensity on every piece he made, fully immersing himself in the construction, the details, the playfulness, and the humor. That phrase became a kind of gentle reminder to step back, to breathe, and to appreciate life—even when he himself was fully engaged in the relentless labor of creation.

It's a phrase I carry with me constantly, especially when things feel chaotic. His art, like his life, was labor-intensive and playful. And just as he urged others to take it easy, his work invites viewers to step back and enjoy the entire picture, rather than getting lost in the tiny details.

AS: He was silent, you wrote. Is your writing a response to his silence?

Kobayashi: Yes. He spoke in metal, I speak in words. Both fragile, both lasting. Writing became a way to converse again. Each piece is a letter—unsent, yet always written.

AS: Ten years after his death, she still walks among works that his hands have transformed from warm memories into metal and paint. **WM**