

SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY

LONGFORMS

Robert Kobayashi: Tin Man

By Becket Gourlay



Installation view at Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. | Photo: Adam Reich

A phenomenon known as “tin cry,” or the sound produced by tin when bent, is characteristic of the malleable metal that makes up much of the works on display in *Robert Kobayashi: Take It Easy, Kid*. Curated by Kobayashi’s daughter, Misa Kobayashi, the exhibition assembles pieces by the late artist that represent his practice through the lens of memory and reflection. Ranging from pointillist paintings in oil, objects built to delight, and his signature mixed-media works made of cut, hammered, and painted ceiling tin, each is accompanied by anecdotal text written by Misa. These words give voice to the works, anchoring them in contexts and environments previously known only to those closest to him. The aforementioned “tin cry” is easily compared to Kobayashi’s work: understated yet noticeable, quiet and controlled, while distinct and unmistakable.

Kobayashi’s devotion to the material did not develop immediately. His artistic beginnings, spurred on by his sister Fumiko’s encouragement, are a result of his service in World War II, after which he studied art first at the Honolulu Academy of Arts then traveling onward to New York to study at the Brooklyn Museum School with the support of the 1944 GI Bill. In the early days of his career, Kobayashi exhibited Abstract Expressionist work at the Brata and Camino galleries, but a love for the works of Impressionists like Seurat altered his course, leading him down the road of

*Prince Street, 1979-82*



Cat's Tail and Tie, 1996

representational art. Works like *Cat's Tail and Ties* (1996), and *Prince Street* (1979-82) are oil on canvas, conjuring imagery composed of countless dots. The works are colorful and deceptively simple from a distance, but up close, they reveal the impressive nature of such a technique and the dedication of the maker's touch.

Oil paintings, *Vermont Window* (1989) and *Fleur de Lis #4* (1979), continue the pointillist trend, each depicting a vibrant interior space, with specific attention paid to the patterns and motifs on the walls. Something worthy of mention about all of Kobayashi's oil works on canvas is the physical depth of the substrate. These edges, 3 to 4 inches of extra space, are treated as seriously as the face

of the canvas. The images wrap all the way around, and in some works, contain additional information that one would miss if viewed solely head-on. The earliest work in the show, *Cat Peering Through the Door* (1979), includes hints of the deft mark-making in the later pointillist works, but stands out in its graphic composition. An interior space, decorated with patterned curtains, a couch, a rug, and potted plants, is viewed through a door by the head of a black-and-white cat, calling into question the scale of the space. Is this a life-sized living room beset upon by a massive cat? Or are we peeking through the cross-section of a dollhouse at a standard housecat? The edges of the canvas provide no answers, but we do discover a side table and a lamp that a frontal view belies. This minimal yet intentional exploration of the third dimension toes the line of painting and sculpture, a line Kobayashi would blur to the fullest extent with the introduction of tin to his practice.

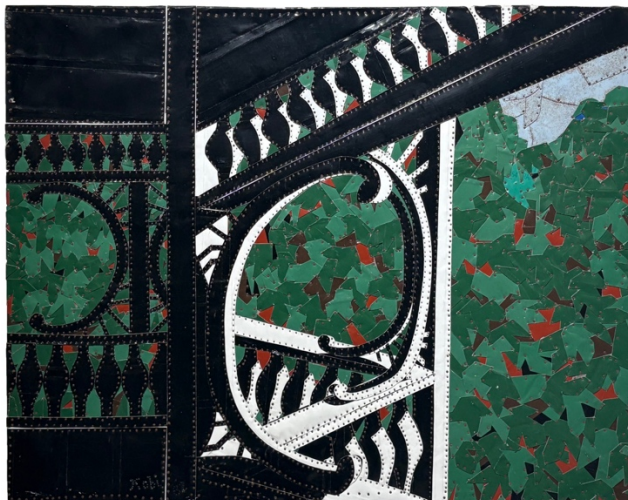


Fleur-de-lis #4, 1979



Cat Peering Through the Door, 1979

Kobayashi began to employ tin in his work in the late 1970s, around the same time that the artist purchased a building that housed a butcher shop in NoLita and converted "Moe's Meat Market" into a studio-cum-gallery, where he made and exhibited his own work and that of friends in the windows and first floor of the space. The name, however, remained the same. Taking material inspiration from his urban setting, Kobayashi scavenged ceiling tin from building sites in the neighborhood, and the panels became a mainstay in his arsenal. Cut into strips and various shapes, the tin was nailed into place on wooden panels, evolving his pointillist interests, albeit in a more aggressive and active direction. This mixed-media approach was dubbed "clouage" by writer Michael Florescu, the French word for "nailing."

*Morning Light*, 1982

The earliest work made out of tin in the exhibition, *Morning Light* (1982), suggests an approach to image-making akin to a jigsaw puzzle, the pre-painted and colored tin cut and arranged to depict a view of decorative spindlework thrown into dramatic relief by the titular light. Backdropped by green and brown foliage, viewers can spot bits of serial numbers and other details printed onto the tin. To gain compositional and chromatic control, Kobayashi went on to apply paint to bare tin instead, and this style of making became his enduring signature, producing works of painted tin and nails up through the last few years of his life. He continued to follow his Impressionistic and representational inclinations in his subject matter, creating still lifes, landscapes, and portraits in his personal style.

Writer William Grimes refers to Kobayashi as an “artist of whimsy” in *The New York Times*, and the title feels especially apt, thanks to the inclusion of two objects in the exhibition. Kobayashi’s tinkerer spirit is exemplified in the works *Friendly Skies* (1980-81) and *Race Car* (c. 1990). Both are tin and wood vehicles, each with a sentimental family tie. *Friendly Skies* is a biplane with buffed silver paneling, red wooden wings, and a sizable propeller on the front. A gift Kobayashi made for his father-in-law, who had served in the Air Force, the plane is

*Friendly Skies*, 1981*Race Car*, c. 1990

piloted by a wooden man whose hand is held aloft, and upon a spin of the propeller, it waves at the viewer. The toy-like scale, moving parts, and obvious care with which it was made display Kobayashi’s commitment to craft and attention to detail. *Race Car* is centered in the gallery and was made for Misa. She recounts memories of her father pushing her up and down the streets of the Bowery in it, and notes that projects such as these “were as much for him as for me.” The car boasts a speedometer made from a meat thermometer and a seat made from scrap leather, courtesy of a glove factory, yet more testaments to Kobayashi’s predilection for repurposing.

Kobayashi's exploration of the tin medium saw shifts in the forms that populate the "canvas," and many works of his forgo the intentional, puzzle-esque cutting and fitting for a different mode, in which hundreds of small strips of the metal accumulate to form swaths of tin and nail, often echoing natural forms such as clouds or grass. A trio of works in *Take It Easy, Kid*, all shown in proximity to each other, highlight this method. *Johnny Boy Lived There* (2010) and *View of Ohio, 1PM* (2006) are exterior landscapes that arrange the strips into rippling fields of grass and cloud-filled horizons. The differences in landscapes Kobayashi experienced, from his youth in mountainous O'ahu to the open Ohio plains his wife introduced him to, contributed to his appreciation for nature's beauty, as bright blue skies and lush green grass appear to be subjects Kobayashi took great joy in immortalizing.



Johnny Boy Lived There, 2010



View of Ohio, 1PM, 2006



Touchdown at Hilo, 2002

In the work *Touchdown at Hilo* (2002), Kobayashi zooms in even further. Made in the wake of the events of September 11th, the entire work is consumed by these grassy bits, the variation in color enlivening the work as various shades of green are offset by oranges and yellows. The scene overwhelms the field of vision and doesn't necessarily suggest a reaction to a national tragedy, save for a spoked wheel that is potentially unnoticeable at first glance. While one could read its inclusion as evidence of wreckage, the ambiguity contributes to the liminal composition, as the lack of horizon line or proper understanding of scale disorients the viewer. Misa likens these works to "portals," set apart from the rest of his body of work. She sees them as her father's reaction to times of despair, defiantly producing work that gives the viewer a chance to step through and leave behind their sorrows.

Kobayashi also demonstrates an eye for restraint and minimalism in a grouping of works on display. The back gallery hosts two botanical works, each with its own air of prudence. *Flowers From the Rust Belt* (2002) exemplifies a rare moment where Kobayashi allows the tin to truly speak for itself, unadorned and oxidized to a true, rust brown. While not the only scaled-up bouquet he made, this one stands out in its monochrome directness, with no delineation between pot, stem, or bloom. *White on White* (2011) follows suit, as the title suggests. The leafy composition is the most recent work on display, and according to Misa, it is part of a series of works made late in his life that all resist color. The piece is ghostly, yet high contrast, each nail head and intersection starkly visible.



Flowers from the Rust Belt, 2002



She Grew Up in Front of Me, 2011

with *White on White* and *Flowers From the Rust Belt*, it completes a trio of colorless works, the grays, whites, and blacks conjuring a moody, somewhat melancholic atmosphere, furthered by the subject's disaffected and austere expression. Many of Kobayashi's titles were or verged on the literal. Still, this specific work is emotionally ambiguous, as indiscernible as the motive or message behind the work of any enigmatic artist.



White on White, 2012

Kobayashi's works toyed with the spectrums of subject, medium, and gravitas. They could be described as dreamlike, surreal, familiar, domestic, personal, and universal, all in the same breath. The neatest possible summation of his practice, and perhaps personhood, is best put by Misa: "His work was always labor-intensive but playful; when peering too hard at each individual nail or paint dot to be able to see the entire piece, I'm certain that he'd rather the viewer take it easy and step back to enjoy the whole."



Installation view at Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. | Photo: Adam Reich