

For several years now, the painter Robert Kobayashi has been picking up tin cans and saving them. The printed and enameled containers of processed food, meat and fish, fruit and vegetables and cooking oil, of paints and varnishes and adhesives used in the construction and auto service industries, and bits of aluminum siding and the like are the material to which Kobayashi directs his penetrating and sceptical eye. Allied to his dexterity with metal shears and with recourse to a permanent supply of wire brads and small brass nails, he hammers out of them his landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes, interiors, exteriors, still lifes, portraits real and imaginary, formal studies, and flower pictures.

The ostensible subject matter is not new; neither are the images with which Kobayashi represents it new, certainly not in the presently fashionable application of the phrase "new image." They are, indeed, traditional images. But his materials and his technique, which one may quite properly dignify with the neologism *clouage*, from the French *clouer*: to nail, bring to familiar vignettes and their likely even more familiar representations a potent irony. It is this that transforms them. A Kobayashi plaque, 8 by 7

inches, depicts a single Morning Glory at the point of its blue maturity in seven seemingly haphazard patches of enameled tin and aluminum; 246 brass-tipped nails precisely define its boundaries in a glowing recessive space created from ten more-or-less rectilinear patches of silvered tin, the contours of each patch also being outlined with brass nails.

It is instinctive to stress the prosaic constituents of a work of art only when its effects have been discovered to be mysterious. It may indeed be thought strange to make of the Morning Glory an icon. The Morning Glory is the quintessential example of the transitory in nature, even more so than the butterfly; more so because of the irony of its being rooted, for it is natural to think of an icon as implicating the eternal. But of course the Morning Glory is only ostensibly the subject matter: What we really see when we look at these plaques are the minute-by-minute responses of the artist himself. Every nailhead, every hammer blow, every crimp and buckle in the tin and aluminum are seen to have experienced the artist's actions, that is, his intentions, which is true of any painting, any sculpture. But the uniqueness of these evidently charming, seemingly modest works

is that their authenticity derives directly from the acultural nature of the materials and of the methods employed in their making.

It may be well to mention that Kobayashi's paintings are poetic and frequently surrealistic reveries on the inanimate, while the tin plaques reverberate with the drama of real life. In *The Fan*, a dark-haired woman clothed in an elaborately shouldered blue dress is seated in the corner of her porch. Luxuriant green-enameled foliage threatens to encroach upon and overwhelm the woman and her house, as it has already overwhelmed the patched tin sky. And all the while, indeed forever, the tin can woman, her slightly downturned lips nailed shut, toys with a fan. But we are not to be seduced by the piquancy of the image. The materials of which it is constituted make an equally large, if not larger, claim upon our attention. We cannot help observing that the patterns in which the nails have been hammered always follow the contours of the independently expressive shapes of the tin patches. The nailheads are thus seen as primarily functional. Yet each one (and its individual placement in space and its relationship to every other nailhead) is, mysteriously, more than purely function-

al, more than its polarity, merely decorative. While logically they are vital to secure the tin patches, they also create their own abstract pattern. It is as though the pattern of nailheads carries a cryptic message that must be deciphered. These points or periods of brass and wire conform to no repetitive symmetry that is a part of the unnatural order which in mass societies defines function and, increasingly, art.

Kobayashi's nailhead patterns are closer, surely, to the felicitous correspondences of nature. Thus his work has nothing whatever in common with that of some of the masters of abstract collage, Schwitters, say, or Anne Ryan, vastly different though they are, because except in a few of his genre pieces, in which charm is the most obvious quality, Kobayashi's *clouages* express separation rather than synthesis. In one of his most remarkable landscapes, a late summer scene in which five Matisse-like blue tin swallows wheel and swoop above a clouded horizon, the separation between one element and another, and the distinction between one quality and another, and the distances between cloud and tree, soil and sky, flight and growth, are literally hammered home by his technique.

As has already been noted, his technique continually draws one's attention away from the image. Because the technique is so intimately bound to the "found" materials he uses, the attention is inevitably drawn to the materials. It is with a sudden shock, then, that one recognizes that Kobayashi's tin cans and cut-off aluminum siding are the materials traditionally used by those who live in the most abysmal poverty to shelter themselves from the elements. Kobayashi's materials and techniques are the traditional ones used by the poorest Carriocas and Haitians (indeed, by the inhabitants of shantytowns all over the Third World) to plug the holes in their permanently makeshift homes. After this recognition one will not look at these exquisitely sheared and nailed patches of tin sky in a Kobayashi landscape without wondering at the gaps that they are there to cover. (Josef, June 6-27)

Michael Florescu

## ROBERT KOBAYASHI



Robert Kobayashi, Yellow Leaf, 1980. "Clouage," 10 x 10". Courtesy Josef Gallery.