

## ART REVIEW

# A Multimedia Mystery Man

**TATTOOED ANGEL:** Painting and Sculpture by Robert Kobayashi, through Aug. 14 at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, off Northern Boulevard, Roslyn Harbor. Open 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Tuesdays-Fridays; 1-5 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays. Open 1-5 p.m., Monday, July 4.

By Karin Lipson

**T**HE STORY of this exhibition actually begins at an odd little place called Moe's Meat Market, on Elizabeth Street in lower Manhattan.

What's odd about Moe's is that it's not a meat market — at least, not anymore. In fact, the store is locked. For years, though, the storefront has featured changing window displays of strange and whimsical objects and art — a stool with sneakers on all four legs; wooden puppets; a toy airplane, hanging like a mobile in the air; and, most distinctively, figures and still-life plaques made of pieces of tin nailed into a wood framework, the nails often forming deftly arranged patterns.

The displays come and go anonymously, but by now local residents know their source is artist Robert Kobayashi, who owns the building that houses the store. (Kobayashi left the name of the meat market on the storefront window when he bought the building.) The neighborhood people watch for the window displays, and, says Kobayashi, have chided him when he hasn't changed the work for a while.

As it happens, Janice Parente and Phyllis Stigliano, curators at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, have also watched that storefront for years, and their interest in finding out more about "Moe's" led to "Tattooed Angel," the exhibition of paintings and sculpture now at the museum.

The changing tableaux at Moe's Meat Market say a good deal about the work we currently see at the museum: They reflect its puckish humor, its quiet presence, its frequent mysteriousness and its concern with appearances and disappearances — in some paintings, for instance, angels appear on windowed balconies, leaving it unclear whether they are alighting or just leaving, and why they are there in the first place.

Other paintings show odd juxtapositions of objects: In "Seascape," we get a button, a pocket watch, a lock and a fork washed up on shore; in "Portrait of Marie," a small girlish figure stands next to a giant cat, and in a series based on the "Cat and the Fiddle" nursery rhyme, we get all the expected things, as well as the participation of some seemingly hapless angels. (The frequent appearance of angels, says Kobayashi, is unplanned — "maybe I was looking for luck.")

Executed in a pointillist style, the paintings owe something to Sourat, of course, but equally obviously to folk and native art. Many show the influence of the Surrealists, what with their washed-up watches and flying spoons. There's even a feeling, in some of

these canvases, of medieval art, with its calm acceptance of long-winged angels as real, everyday presences inhabiting our world.

The least prepossessing are the pictures that seem to owe the greatest debt to folk art. By contrast, the best paintings veer away from folk art derivation to create a world of their own — one that is filled with mystery, with a quiet longing, and with a beauty made evanescent by all those shimmering dots.

Though Kobayashi says his pointillism is unrelat-



Robert Kobayashi's 'Door to Balcony,' 1984 oil on canvas

Photos by Kate Keller

ed to the work in his tin pieces, the patterns of nails in his sculpture and wall plaques certainly look like a three-dimensional equivalent of his painting style.

The tin work — made of scraps of metal from old Italian olive oil cans, cookie containers and various neighborhood discards collected by Kobayashi and friends — shows a surprising range. There are free-standing figures, still lifes, landscapes, city scenes and wall pieces of an architectonic quality. There's also a whole room that more or less duplicates the window displays of Moe's Meat Market, becoming a wondrous place in the process.

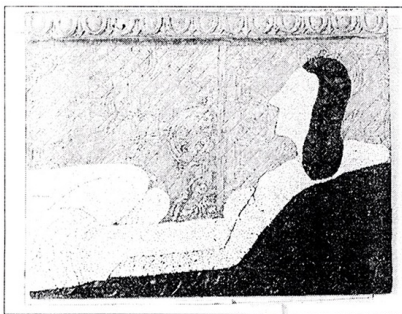
The work, even beyond the Moe's Meat Market installation, can be whimsical, charming and funny: A high-kicking, balletic horse, covered with nail studs, and the three-dimensional "Still Life Enjoyed," featuring a banana skin, an apple core and a well-bitten watermelon slice, are two among many examples.

It can also be serious and rather imposing, as with the "Tattooed Angel," the white tin sculpture that gave its name to the show. (But never *too* serious — the red tattoo on the angel's arm comes from an olive-oil container.)

Even more directly than in his paintings, the folksy quality can be intrusive. Some of the country scenes, especially, cleverly assembled from pieces of tin and aluminum of differing colors and patterns, are too "cutesy" — a word that Kobayashi himself uses in acknowledging their shortcomings.

In recent years the artist has moved away from these craft-oriented metal collages to works of somewhat greater abstraction. His 1985 Madonna-like "Standing Nude," its "skin" of rust-colored metal pieces mounted and nailed on the diagonal, like a mummy wrapping, has an archaic quality that evokes ancient cultures. Large wall pieces such as the sinuous "Black Sofa" and a series based on Ionic columns also suggest that this artist is moving in new directions with the tin technique that he has made his own.

A catalog for the exhibition includes a charming essay on Kobayashi by Alec Wilkinson. The catalog could have been improved, though, by a checklist of the exhibition. ■■■



'Black Sofa,' 1986 nails, tin on wood