

Koppel, Lily. "An Artist of the Street and Quiet Reticence," *The New York Times*, 19 January 2009.

The New York Times



Robert Kobayashi, 84, who makes images of his neighborhood with beaten metal, says he gave up on pursuing fame long ago. Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

In a city full of people hungry to succeed, where young people flock with visions of making it big, Robert Kobayashi is a rare example of a New York artist who has spent his life working quietly behind closed doors.

On a recent day, leaning in the doorframe of his building at 237 Elizabeth Street in NoLIta and wearing a paint-splattered sweater, Mr. Kobayashi, 84, looked more like a teenager. "I don't talk much, man," he warned.

Over the years, the building he bought for \$35,000 in 1977 has attracted as much interest as the reticent artist who occupied it. Passers-by have long stopped to peer at the building's mysterious dollhouse-sized door, fit for a New Yorker of Stuart Little's stature.

The door— there is also a full-size door— and Mr. Kobayashi's changing tableau of work in the window of what was formerly a butcher shop called Moe's Meat Market are just a few of the details that have turned the building into a neighborhood landmark.

"It always had a magical aspect," said Phyllis Stigliano, 59, who was the curator for one of Mr. Kobayashi's shows, "Tattooed Angel," at the Nassau County Museum of Art in 1988. "You looked through the window, and all you could see was a cat in a four-poster bed fashioned out of an old radio and a little tree made out of wood with tin ornaments."

Mr. Kobayashi's art consists of paintings and sculptures created from pounded metal, scraps cut from decorative stamped ceiling tin, beer cans and Café Bustelo cans collected by neighbors. In a sculpture titled "Mrs. Yamasake's Flowers Waving Goodbye," metal petals appear to blow in the wind.

"He's like a magician," said Ms. Stigliano, who helps Mr. Kobayashi's wife run his gallery. It replaced the butcher shop and recently opened full time to exhibit his work, offering the public a first glimpse into his universe. His art rests on Moe's original tiled floor and hangs from meat hooks.

When asked why he decided to open the gallery now that he is in his 80s, Mr. Kobayashi said, "I wanted to test it out."

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Mr. Kobayashi's depiction of his own storefront gallery. Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

He gave up long ago on trying to sell himself to galleries. He remains unfazed by the lure of fame even as, over the years, he watched many artists he knew gain recognition and become, as he put it, "big shots."

Along the way, using materials "harvested" from his neighborhood, he memorialized what had vanished from streets now filled with boutiques. He depicted the candy shops, social clubs, a funeral home on Mulberry Street, his own building, and all the places he used to pass while collecting cookie boxes and olive-oil canisters from cafes in Little Italy.

Mr. Kobayashi, who goes by Kobi, works every day in the studio in his small upstairs apartment while keeping watch over the street.

One of his favorite subjects was Mary's Butcher Shop across the street, which was run by Mary Agastino until she died in 2002. She was like his "grandmother," Mr. Kobayashi said. "Mary was emphatic with her meat cleaver," he chuckled.

"When we first got down here it was like living in a book," said his wife, Kate Keller Kobayashi, 62, a photographer. "There was a big narcotics scene in the neighborhood."

As a young painter, Mr. Kobayashi worked in Abstract Expressionist style and hung out at the Cedar Tavern along with artists like Franz Kline. "When I came to New York, it was very exciting," he said. "Kerouac was writing, people used to discuss art."

By the mid-'60s, he was through with "splashing," as he calls abstract art, and felt drawn to a more primitive form. He said his palette was influenced by the old Dutch masters and Italian still-life painters.

From 1956 until the late 1970s, Mr. Kobayashi worked as a gardener at the Museum of Modern Art, where he met his wife. One of his sculptures is part of the permanent collection of the Modern and an oil painting is at the Brooklyn Museum, but he points out that they are kept in storage.

Born and raised in Honolulu, he served in World War II and came to New York afterward, "thanks to the G.I. Bill." One of his sisters who was living here at the time and who, Mr. Kobayashi fondly recalled, introduced him to the writings of James Joyce, persuaded him to move. He later studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School.

Since opening his gallery full time, he has sold dozens of his works, which average around \$6,000. But he is taking this success in stride, attributing it in part to geography. "People come and go," he said. "Almost everyone comes to New York once in their life. Many pass the storefront."