

Yau, John. "How Robert Kobayashi Elevated the Tin Can," *Hyperallergic*, 12 September 2020.

## HYPERALLERGIC



Robert Kobayashi, "White Sheet" (1997), ceiling tin, paint, nails on wood, 17 3/4 x 15 1/2 x 11/2 in. (all images courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery)

Two years after Robert Kobayashi (1925-2015) died in Honolulu, Hawaii, where he was born 90 years earlier, Jeremiah Ross, author of *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul* (2018), published an opinion piece, "The End of Moe's Meat Market," in the *New York Times* (October 10, 2017). While it is not necessary to read the article before you go to the exhibition *Robert Kobayashi: Moe's Meat Market* at Susan Inglett Gallery, I highly recommend reading it afterwards.

Yet, as much as the article is an ode to a part of New York that has long since disappeared, leaving little trace, I caution viewers to not confuse Kobayashi's art and life, which are deeply entwined. Kobayashi may have needed the space afforded by the four-story tenement with a storefront he bought in what was once known as Little Italy to make his art, but in the end the work stands on its own.

Kobayashi's method stands alone. He used thin metal strips and bands cut from cans, as well as discarded sections of tin ceilings, as his principal material. The sections were painted a single color, and used in the construction of both the composition and frame. He affixed the strips with nails, sometimes using just what was necessary to secure them. Other times he used many nails, activating the shape. Through this method of bricolage, he made still lifes, nudes, cityscapes, and landscapes of grass that are unlike anything I have seen.



Installation view, Robert Kobayashi: Moe's Meat Market at Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

The one artist I find Kobayashi to have an affinity with is Ray Yoshida (1930-2009), who used pointillist dots in his paintings to define pattern as well create images. While both artists were born in Hawaii and were of Japanese descent, I do not think that they knew each other. Yoshida lived and worked in Chicago, where he was an influential teacher at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (1959-2005), while Kobayashi worked at the Museum

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of Modern Art (1954-1978) in various capacities. In addition to their use of the pointillist method – and to my mind this is more important – neither of them fit into what was going on around them. They are stylistically unique.

In 1977, Kobayashi and his wife, the photographer Kate Keller Kobayashi, bought a building at 237 Elizabeth Street, where they lived and kept studios. Although Kobayashi showed with artist-run galleries such as Brata and Camino in the 1950s, by the time he retired from MoMA he was little known in the art world and had no gallery championing him. It seems to me that while he was working at MoMA, he became less interested in becoming part of a scene, joining a movement, or working in an approved style, and essentially withdrew from the art world. He chose to pursue his own vision.

Kobayashi's point of contact with the public was Moe's Meat Market, his storefront space, which he kept largely as it had been when he and his wife took over the building, and where he occasionally mounted his work, and kept irregular hours.



Robert Kobayashi, "White on White" (2012), ceiling tin, paint, nails on wood, 36 x 24 1/2 x 1 inches

There are 24 works in exhibition, dating from 1973 to 2012, a span of nearly four decades. Aside from "Maquette of Moe's Market" (n.d.), a touching replica of the five-story brick building at 237 Elizabeth Street, all the works were made with ceiling tin, paint, and nails holding the metal sections to a wood support. This assembly is complimented by photographs taken in and of 237 Elizabeth Street, showing different moments of the Kobayashis' lives as well as neighbors and street activity.

The maquette is on a pedestal in the entryway leading to the reception desk. The first gallery is filled with sculptures and wall works. The back gallery contains the photographs and a table on which sits the earliest work in the exhibition, a sculpture of a cat titled "Shido Chan" (1973). In her "Reminiscences" (which came with the press kit that I received and is available from the gallery), Kate Keller Kobayashi writes: "In the mid-1970s, Kobi started making mirror frame and small sculptures, including 'Shido Chan' [...]."

The sculpture is whimsical, charming, and uncanny. The round cutout sections used to make the cat's face suggest eyes, which add an eerie note to the work, while the tail hanging down

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from the table infuses it with humor. The shiny nails dotting the surface provide another captivating element.

At the same time, the shiny white tin is reminiscent of porcelain, which looks like it was reassembled. I was reminded of *kintsukoroi* ("golden repair"), the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold or silver dust. In Japan, the cat is revered for bringing good fortune. By suggesting that this object has been reassembled, Kobayashi seems to be commenting on taking control of his destiny.

Finally – and this is what gives all of these readings added poignancy – Kobi was clearly familiar with the restful, watchful positions that cats assume, and mimics it perfectly in "Shido Chan."



Installation view, *Robert Kobayashi: Moe's Meat Market* at Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

If the dates are any indication, it seems that Kobayashi would spend time exploring a subject before moving on. Four nudes seen from behind, looking at a wall, are dated between 1997 and '99. The black-haired woman in "White Sheet" (1997) props her head on her elbow and looks at a green wall made of sections of stamped tin. In this and other images of a nude, he incorporates the stamped design into the work. By cutting curved strips of tin, he is able to convey the curving form of the woman's arms, neck, and buttocks.

The woman looks away in all the nudes in the exhibition, allowing them to exist in their own inaccessible domain. For all the sameness of material and process, Kobayashi was able to attain a wide range of nuanced feeling and subtle pictorial conventions. For example, in the still life "Glass Cup" (1998), he uses the space between the cut sheets of tin to convey the contour of a blue cup in front of a similarly colored bottle.

In the sculpture "Flowers Seeking Attention" (2002), the brown pot with a big handle leans forward, as do the blue tulips inside. They could be turning toward the sunlight, but there is another, more melancholic way of seeing this work: that the flowers are a surrogate for Kobayashi's desire to sustain attention. The low beveled pedestal on which the leaning pot sits adds to the feeling of isolation this sculpture quietly and gracefully radiates.

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Robert Kobayashi, "Flowers Seeking Attention" (2002), ceiling tin, paint, nails on wood, 21 x 20 in. diameter

Although I don't know if Kobayashi ever discussed this, it seems to me that he recognized a cultural connection to postwar Japan in his work with discarded tin cans he collected while at MoMA. In the 1950s, in its first steps toward economic recovery, Japan became a major producer of cheap toys for the global market. The toys were made from recycled tin cans, the bulk of which came from America. It is during this era that the arrogantly dismissive phrase "Made in Japan" entered into American speech. In his tin paintings and sculptures, and their repetitive and meticulous craftsmanship, Kobayashi subverted the stereotype of cheap production by elevating a painted object fashioned of recycled tin into the realm of art. In this sense, the works are deeply political as well as aesthetic, and the feelings they emit gain another dimension.

Robert Kobayashi: *Moe's Meat Market* opens at Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) on September 17 and continues through November 7.