

The Spirit of Elizabeth Street

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If we are lucky enough to be open to the world around us, sometimes, something so special resonates, that we are compelled to spread the joy it inspires. If there is anything we need now, it is joy. So, buckle your seatbelt, roll down the windows, and get ready for a ride that is only a block long.

Meet me at 237 Elizabeth Street. The address houses art, indomitable spirit, community, love, food, and the kinds of bonds that make life worth living. In 1977, Robert Kobayashi, known as Kobi, and his wife, Kate Keller, bought the building which was formerly Moe's Meat Market. All tenants were permitted to stay in their apartments and, to preserve the building's footprint on Elizabeth Street, the butcher's sign remained. Kobi, who worked at MOMA as a gardener and caretaker, transformed the storefront into his studio but with an eye towards history, kept the black and white tiled floor and the tin walls. He and Kate had a daughter, Misa, who fit seamlessly into the melting pot of kids who frolicked in fire hydrants of that bohemian neighborhood.

One of the apartments upstairs was the home of Mary Albanese, the mother of Moe, who was the namesake of Moe's Meat Market, but was now the butcher at the shop across the street, Albanese Meats and Poultry. Moe was just a nickname for her son, who until this year, ran the butcher shop. Moe was a nickname for Gandolfo. Of course it was. This is New York City.

Kobi shared his art—paintings, sculptures, installations-- in the storefront windows where passersby and neighbors alike would peer in to see the latest offerings at Moe's. The door was often open--not for gallery visits--but to allow the spirit of the neighborhood to waft in and keep inspiration flowing.

Kobi died in 2015 in his native Honolulu and Kate, after much deliberation, sold the building. In the spirit of history and the kindness that seem to be baked into the bricks of the edifice, the new owner permitted her to remain as a tenant, but the gallery closed, in 2017, after 30 years.

Fast forward to last week, when I read that the show at the Susan Inglett Gallery, "Moe's Meat Market," was in its last days. Election tension was crackling, I had to so many things to do but I donned my sneakers and walked to Chelsea to see Kobi's work, perhaps for the last time. Vividly colored paintings and tin sculptures did not disappoint but it was Kate's photographs, hanging in the back room, that reminded me of what Moe's Meat Market was all about. A conversation with the gracious gallery owner was the perfect end to the story because she told me personal stories of the artist, his families, and his community. Without saying so, I believe we affirmed that if the spirit that inhabited that block of Elizabeth Street is not apparent in New York right now, we will aspire, through art, to make sure it returns.

Perhaps it was Moe the butcher's death this year at the age of 94 from the coronavirus, or the finality of the exhibition at the gallery that inspired my sentimentality and willingness to look back to put this reflection on paper. Actually, it is something more substantive. It is the realization that art and community are not only things of the past; if we continue to emulate those who were kind enough to forge the bonds between the two, we too, we will make our mark on the world that can inspire generations to come.