

As Told by Kate Keller Kobayashi

Moe's Meat Market located at 237 Elizabeth Street was a work in progress from 1977 until 2017. It was the presence of friends, family, and neighbors who gifted Moe's with their talent, energy, and laughter throughout the years that made it possible for it to evolve and thrive.

By fluke and good fortune with a sizable amount of naiveté Kobi (Robert Kobayashi) and I bought a tenement building in what was then known as Little Italy. In 1975 Kobi and I realized that our 350 sq. ft. apartment on West 84th Street could no longer hold us, especially since it served as a living space for us, our two cats, and as a studio for Kobi. We started looking for space.

During dinner with friends who lived on Prince Street, a discussion about loft spaces started up and the fact that Kobi and I were looking for one in lower Manhattan. A few months later, the same friends informed us of a building that was for sale around the corner from them on Elizabeth Street. Until that point we had not considered buying, but had no luck finding an affordable loft to live in that could double as Kobi's studio. We thought - why not look?

Our friends introduced us to the butcher, Gna Ciraulo, who had his shop in the building that was for sale. He was in his seventies and, along with his siblings, had decided to sell the building. Gna was a sweet bear of a man who took us under his wing almost immediately even without really knowing us. He explained how his parents bought the building in the early 1900s, and at one time the entire family—his parents, seven brothers and sisters along with their spouses and children—lived in the building's eight apartments. The butcher shop had once been a bar but was turned into a grocery store during Prohibition. Its last chapter was the butcher shop that he and his brother Moe ran until Moe's death a few years earlier. In the 1950s the brothers built an addition to the back of the building: a large room that served as an unusual restaurant. After Moe's death, the restaurant went dark. Gna kept the butcher shop, running it by himself and was ready to hang up his apron by the time we met. The last member of the Ciraulo family still living in the building was his sister, Mary Albanese, who owned her own butcher shop with her son (also named Moe) located directly across the street from 237.

The butcher shop, Moe's Meat Market, had white glazed tin-paneled walls, an Art Deco mirror in the back of the showcase, empty meat hooks, a marble counter, and an old metal monolith of a cash register. The storefront was quiet and strangely sparse the first day we saw it.

To view the rest of the ground floor, which included the backroom where the restaurant had been, Gna led us from the well-lit storefront through a very narrow dark passageway where the meat locker took up a huge area in a middle room. A single bulb hung from the ceiling that cast a weak light on the public phone attached to the wall opposite the locker. I remember having an odd feeling about the phone as we passed it.

Whatever I sensed that day seemed to be justified by the fact that the phone was removed from the wall before we took over the building, leaving only the scrawled mystery numbers that encircled the periphery of its former presence. A year after moving in, federal agents knocked on the store door requesting a search of the ground floor, recorded the numbers on the wall, and left. Soon after, Kobi painted over the numbers, leaving only their significance in our imagination.

The backroom was empty except for a large mound of dead horseflies in the far end corner, which seemed ominous and gloomy. Besides the surreal dune of huge insects, the room's symmetry along with the gentle light that came in through the translucent glass windows gave the space a balance and calm. Two wagon wheel chandeliers hung in the middle of the room and, along with the wainscoting which circled the walls, made the space look like a 1950s country restaurant rather than one located in New York City's Little Italy. Over the years people would knock on the store door asking us if the restaurant was still in business, remembering it from the 1960s and telling us they had read about it in *Cue Magazine*. Wine for the restaurant was made in the sizable wine press encased in cement that still stands in the basement. Gna told us the back room was also the scene of many family gatherings and celebrations. Kobi and I did not imagine a time in the future when we, too, would use the room for the same kind of gatherings and celebrations.

It was the 1970s and New York City wasn't doing well. This was dramatically evident on Elizabeth Street, where within a half-block of the butcher shop three burned-out abandoned buildings stood at the corner of Prince Street. Despite the bleakness of dirty streets and abandoned buildings, there was a kind of magic to the block that one couldn't quite describe. For one thing, it felt like a village; kids played on the sidewalks, neighbors chatted on the stoops and the small mom and pop stores were busy. On 237's block alone there were three butchers, a hardware store, dry cleaner, shoe repair, two bodegas, and Bella's Café on the corner. Across from Bella's was the Parisi Bakery's ovens whose fresh-baked bread aroma wafted through the streets and where neighborhood residents bought pane loaves at wholesale prices.

Walking the streets in Little Italy back then, felt like entering a land far from the New York City subway we had just exited. Many storefront windows were occupied by saints, and while these front rooms felt dark, dusty, and unused, one sensed there was activity in the room behind, hidden from view. Sometimes men would sit silently outside without smiling or acknowledging any other presence on the street. At first, it was natural to feel like an intruder in the neighborhood, but that feeling was soon overridden by a fascination with the mystery of the street scenes. It was like living in a book—complete with new sights, enigmas, and new and colorful characters.

The sale negotiations went on for over ten months, and each time we visited Gna, the cane chairs that lined the wall opposite the display case and chopping block were occupied by Gna's old friends and neighbors who were there as much for the companionship as for the meat. And with each visit, Gna gave Kobi a large package of pork chops to take home and encouraged us to consider the latest offer.

During much of the 1960s and early 1970s, Kobi lived a frugal New York City existence, often living and painting in cold-water flats to save money. It was this money he had set aside that enabled us to entertain the idea of buying the building. Finally, on July 27, 1977, the sale papers were signed. The store had been emptied as well as the first-floor apartment. All the other apartments were occupied with people who lived in the building before the 1970s. Kobi and I didn't have a clear plan for the building and hadn't researched the fine art of being a New York City landlord. We only saw space - space to live, studio space for Kobi, and a darkroom for me. We renovated the first-floor apartment with the help of friends from MoMA, where both Kobi and I worked, and to the horror of the older neighbors who witnessed the plaster dust billowing out our windows. Our apartment was a floor-through with enough room to devote the front half to studio space and use the back half for living. The old kitchen on the ground floor that served the restaurant became my darkroom.

Moe's Meat Market was written in script across the store window. Kobi wanted to keep it that way, paying homage to its history and the neighborhood, with the thought that people would remember the name if it ever turned in to something other than a butcher shop. The storefront room was an empty space full of light that streamed through the large windows bouncing off the white glazed walls and high ornate tin ceiling. The ancient black and white tiled floor was both beautiful and comical with its amateur repair patches made over the years without much care for what the original pattern had been. Walls, ceiling, and floor all remained in place for as long as we owned the building.

Even with Kobi's legendary high energy, within the first year of buying 237, it became obvious that it would be impossible for him to maintain his schedule. The maintenance and repair of the building, a full-time job at MoMA in the Registrar Department, and the time needed to create could not fit in his twenty-four-hour days. In May of 1978, Kobi resigned from the Museum, devoting himself to his art and to the building, which in some ways became an extension of his creativity during its makeover.

As a sculptor, Kobi was familiar with carpentry but had little experience with plumbing and electrical repair, both of which were necessary to correct the many building violations that had accumulated over the previous decades. Without help and support in these areas from artist friends and neighbors, we would have never been able to maintain and repair the building. This was particularly true of Mikey, the eccentric owner of the hardware store two doors up from 237, where one could find treasures that had recently and conveniently fallen off the proverbial back of the truck, as well as gadgets from the 1930s. He was a mechanical and electrical genius who guided Kobi through many plumbing and electrical "old building" conundrums. It took the actual village of Little Italy to get us through those first few years.

Mary Albanese, the last sibling to remain in her parents' building, lived in the front apartment above us. She was initially wary of the sale of 237 and our presence in her life, but over time she became an honorary member of our family. While Kobi and I sat in Mary's butcher shop waiting for meat and on Sunday nights when she came to our apartment for dinner, she would tell us her stories about

Elizabeth Street and the people who inhabited it, past and present. She eagerly told us that Martin Scorsese grew up a few doors up the block at 253 and that he made his first student film in the back room of her butcher shop... without paying for the electricity he used. And she was proud when talking about Scorsese's father and mother, though now living in Gramercy Park, coming to her shop weekly to buy meat and catch up on neighborhood news. Mary also gave us sage advice over the years, and once wisely cautioned me, as a photographer, "Never photograph anyone around here without asking." I followed her counsel. When our daughter Misa was born, Mary became Gramma Mary, sharing our joy. She was a tough soul, with a kind heart and the inspiration for Kobi's 1991 children's book, *Maria Mazaretti Loves Spaghetti*, published by Alfred Knopf.

During the ten months of sale negotiations, friends who worked for a moving and storage company decided to create an art handling company, A&S Fine Arts, and needed a place in which to make crates. They asked if we had room at 237, we gave a resounding "Yes!", happy to have familiar faces join us in our new adventure. The meat locker was dismantled, making the middle and back rooms their workshop, leaving the storefront to Kobi's use and imagination.

For the first few years, the storefront housed many of Kobi's installations, including the first small metal works that were hung on the tin walls. In the mid-1970s, Kobi started making mirror frames and small sculptures, including *Shido Chan*, a cat sculpture, made in 1973, which became a permanent fixture of Moe's throughout the years. These metal works were made with cut pieces of tin cans Kobi found in MoMA's office trash and the cans my photo chemicals came in. Once we moved to Elizabeth Street, the scenes of Little Italy and nearby Chinatown markets with their exotically printed tins provided both the inspiration for Kobi to expand his vision and the new material to execute it.

The surreal and whimsical scenes that were placed in the windows, on the floor, and on the meat hooks displayed Kobi's artistic wit and both puzzled and amused the passersby. The tableaus were comprised of Kobi-made pieces and from found objects that intrigued him. A white bunny on a psychiatrist's couch, an airplane hung in mid-air, a quartet of giant flies playing instruments were only a few of the pieces that appeared in Moe's windows. The storefront was empty other than the fanciful objects on display. Strangers and neighbors alike wondered what Kobi was about and looked forward to what would come next. Sometimes comments were left under the door—especially when changes didn't happen often enough.

There were store cats that roamed the ground floor but stayed mainly in the storefront playing and gazing out the large windows. At the bottom of the store's door, Kobi made a cat door with steps and a small mailbox that informed everyone passing by that Thomas Cat resided at 237 1/9. The cats received fan mail over the years, and the cat door was a destination for New York City treasure hunt participants. Years later, when there were no longer cats in Moe's, Kobi hinged the small cat door that led to nowhere, which when opened said, "Scram No Vacancy."

Within three years of moving into the ground floor, A&S Fine Arts outgrew Moe's and needed a larger space just in time for another friend, Dave Allison, to set up his photo studio in the back room. In the mid-1980s, he too outgrew the space giving way to another friend, Beverly Semmes, who used it as her studio until 2000. As the legacy tenants gradually moved out, Kobi renovated each of the apartments. One such move allowed Kobi's daughter, Anne, to move into the apartment above us in the back. Kobi created a unique communication device between our apartments with a hole in Anne's apartment floor through to our ceiling. Though not up to New York City building code, it did make chatting and the passage of small items quite easy. When we bought 237, Kobi mentioned that it should be an "ark" for family and friends who needed space. 237 housed both family and friends, contrary to popular real estate advice. Stays at 237 varied in length and included Tamar Head Losee, George Trakis, Tim Cannon, Juan Iribarren, Geanna Merola, Erik Landsberg, and more. All were in the arts and their presence brought into being a habitat that lent a certain freedom and inspiration.

During the early 1980s, in addition to the ongoing restoration work on the building and fabrication of larger tin work which now included sculpture, Kobi painted large canvases in a pointillist style he began implementing in the early 1970s. It was also at this time that changes started to happen on the block. Older store owners were leaving, and the unused storefronts opened to a new generation of tenants: painters, sculptors, a glassblower, a book designer, Jennifer Dossin, with her own printing press, and small boutiques whose owners worked and lived in them.

With the physical changes taking place in the storefronts and apartments came the usual sight of dumpsters overflowing with construction debris along the streets. Kobi noticed the intricately embossed tin ceilings common in older buildings being discarded and began his own dumpster diving. What others no longer wanted Kobi recognized as a valuable resource that should not be wasted and began to make sculptures using this material. The found wood was carved and used as the armature for the small metal strips Kobi cut from the tin ceilings and secured in place by small nails or brads. In the *Arts Magazine* review of Kobi's 1980 show at the Josef Gallery, Michael Florescu used the French verb *clouage* (to nail) to describe Kobi's technique.

In the 1980s the middle room was mostly unused except for art storage, but in 1984 Nick Rizzo, a friend who represented Kobi, mounted the first show in Moe's, *Robert Kobayashi: Recent Sculpture*. The evolution had begun. The show consisted of large sculptures and wall works using found architectural metal pieces and ceiling tin that had been thrown out. The Museum of Modern Art acquired *Three Plums* (1984) from the *Recent Sculpture* show, and it was included in *Amy Sillman - The Shape of Shape* for the Museum's 2019 reopening. Neighbors who knew that he used the found material for his work would anonymously drop off their tin dumpster finds in front of the store-door. Fragments of Little Italy itself were woven into Kobi's artwork, figuratively and literally.

During the mid-1980s, Phyllis Stigliano and Janice Parente, who were curators at the Nassau County Museum of Art at that time, often passed by Moe's windows while visiting another artist in the neighborhood, Allen Bertoldi. Phyllis, years later, told me that they had often wondered who was

behind the rotating installations in the storefront and left queries under the door that remained unanswered. Having received an invitation from Nick Rizzo about the 1984 show, Phyllis and Janice arranged a viewing of Kobi's work at Moe's that led to *Tattooed Angel: Paintings and Sculptures by Robert Kobayashi* at the Nassau County Museum in June 1988. A catalogue accompanied the show with an unpublished article entitled "Tin" by Alec Wilkinson, a writer for *The New Yorker*.

Our daughter Misa was born in 1987, and because Kobi became the "house dad" while I was at work and did not want his studio to be far from her, he carved Misa's room from half of his studio space. It was from that studio in 1990 that he wrote and illustrated *Maria Mazaretti Loves Spaghetti*.

In 1990 Angel Diversified Art Services presented two shows at Moe's: *Tin Flowers by Robert Kobayashi* and *Red Curtains: Works by Robert Kobayashi*, in which both the front and middle rooms were used as gallery space. Both shows included the metal work and recent paintings.

Misa started nursery school in 1991, and at the same time, Kobi moved his studio downstairs into Moe's storefront. In the new studio, he also improvised an after-school setup for Misa that included a sandbox filled with construction sand taken from a site where a condo was being built on an empty lot up the block, a racing car he put together from fiberglass panels with a meat thermometer as a speedometer and a short-lived Misa-size easel that went unused after the two had disagreements about painting techniques.

This move represented his first real studio, allowing him a space not only for his tools and materials that didn't have to be put away at the end of the day, but also the space where he could be alone with his work. His art flourished and it was during this time that he did many of his flower sculptures and busts of women inspired by memories of his youth in Hawaii.

Through the 1990s until late 2008, Kobi maintained his studio in the storefront of Moe's. The middle room became a gathering place for family and friends during celebrations and holidays with an occasional show of other friend's work: Celia Owens, Ruth Ripnitz, Juan Iribarren, Patrick Neal, Frances Hynes, and Gordon Sasaki.

During the time Kobi's studio was in the storefront, the windows at Moe's had café length curtains that blocked the view into the interior. Now placed in front of the curtains were the familiar quirky installations that alternated with Kobi's new work. The mystery of what or who was behind the curtain reminded me of the storefronts the saints gazed out from years ago, though with a marked difference, Kobi opened up the door to the gallery despite being shy, and though he continued to work, welcomed anyone curious to see what was inside or view a current show in the middle room. Many did venture in, intrigued by the unusual studio/gallery. Kobi and our dog, Leo, were often seen sitting in front of Moe's with friends and neighbors lending to the feeling of informality not usually associated with galleries. When a friend was asked recently what she remembered about Moe's, she replied: "The door was always open."

It was through the efforts of Phyllis Stigliano that Moe's Meat Market finally became Moe's Meat Market, *a gallery*. In 2000 she suggested we start mounting shows of Kobi's metal pieces, which by then had developed into a large body of work. From that point until 2008, Phyllis periodically mounted shows in the middle room of recently finished work, sometimes they were theme-based, such as the grass pieces he produced in response to the destruction our family witnessed after 9/11 or work from specific scenes he drew from his childhood in Hawaii. The gallery was open mostly by appointment and by happenstance, if Kobi had the door open or someone knocked loudly enough. With the gentrification of the neighborhood, there came a surge in tourism which brought more and more who, curious to see inside, wandered in off the street, first passing through Kobi's studio to view the shows installed in the middle room.

A year before Phyllis suggested making the middle room a gallery, Beverly Semmes relocated her studio from the back room of Moe's to a larger space nearby. We decided to take over the room for art storage, an office, and party space. It became the gathering place for Thanksgivings, Christmases, countless birthdays, and many gallery openings. The backroom also became the staging area for the annual decorating of the gingerbread houses by Cam and Tierra, our granddaughters. Their fanciful eatables became the highlight of Moe's windows during the holiday seasons.

Though the neighborhood gradually gentrified, Elizabeth Street maintained its own particular charm thanks to the small boutiques, unique shops, and the daily neighborhood life which continued as ever, evidenced by the Saint Gandolfo Day parade each June that looked and sounded like a scene from a Fellini film. In 1990 Coppola shot the parade scene for his *Godfather III* on the block because it had retained the character of the old Little Italy. By the mid-2000s, there were fewer artists and artisans in the storefronts and along with other changes: Little Italy had become Nolita, popular with tourists who were looking for a New York experience while boutique browsing. In the summer of 2008, Kobi took note of the changes and decided to move his studio back upstairs to the apartment to make room for a larger and more visible gallery. Moe's Meat Market, *a gallery*, opened its first show in the larger space on October 31, 2008. Phyllis and I took turns in the gallery, when our schedules permitted, while Kobi worked in his studio exclusively using tin ceilings as his chosen medium. The sign in the window read, "Open intermittently and by appointment." On January 21, 2009, the article, "An Artist of the Street And Quiet Reticence" appeared in *The New York Times*. Written by Lily Koppel, the piece gave insight into Kobi's world describing his art and gallery. For us, it signaled a good omen for Moe's and for Kobi. Phyllis continued to curate shows and worked in the gallery through 2017.

By 2009 the building was no longer taking the lion's share of Kobi's energy, giving him more time for his art. With this newfound freedom of time and the acknowledgment he felt from those who were visiting the gallery and elsewhere, going back upstairs to a smaller studio both challenged and encouraged him to push his vision further. At times, he referenced details or ideas from older works

while something new was explored in each of the numerous works he produced the last five years he had his studio at 237.

Kobi and I moved for health reasons in January 2014 to Honolulu, where he would periodically ask Phyllis to send over pieces of tin ceiling for the work he created in the house that we rented. Phyllis maintained Moe's with Haniwa, Kobi's oldest daughter, as Misa managed 237 while we were away. In advance of Kobi's 90th birthday on May 5, 2015 invitations were sent out for a party at Moe's. Kobi and I joined everyone via Skype for the festivities.

"The End of Moe's Meat Market," written by Jeremiah Moss in *The New York Times*, announced Moe's Meat Market, a gallery had closed its door at 237 Elizabeth Street on October 7, 2017, with a party. Once again, the backroom of Moe's served as the gathering place for the many friends, neighbors, and family members, this time, for a celebratory toast to the gallery and its resident artist.