

Mark, Steven. "Metal Magician," *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, 27 April 2014, F7.

## Star Advertiser



Robert Kobayashi is a Hawaii-born artist who is known for creating artwork from found scrap metal. Now in his 80s, he has returned to Hawaii from New York to live and work. Kobayashi has turned a corner of his Kailua home into a studio. Credit: Cindy Ellen Russell

Robert Kobayashi, the artist who's become respected and popular despite his best efforts to prevent it, has returned home.

Kobayashi is a member of a generation of Hawaii artists who went to New York in the 1950s to study. But while Harry Tsuchidana and Satori Abe came back, he stayed, setting up shop in the Little Italy section of Manhattan.

Now at the age of 89, he's moved back to Hawaii to deal with health issues, and although he speaks of returning to New York, it looks like he's here to stay.

"I hate the place. Talk about -- people!" he said in his classically straightforward way, referring to New York Crowds.

Kobayashi began his career as a painter, working in abstract expressionism, the fashion of the day. But for the past 20 years or so, he's made his name creating art out of scraps of ornamental tin siding.

He collects it from demolished buildings, paints it or polishes it, cuts it up into strips with tin snips and creates fanciful sculptures and pictures. With hundreds of tiny nails holding down the metal, the pieces shimmer with points of light. Despite working with shards of metal, he's never cut himself.



A detail of a new piece Kobayashi is working on, with hundreds of tiny nails holding down the shards of metal. Credit: Cindy Ellen Russell

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Asked how he came to this unique style, he said, "I don't know. It was the trend-- everybody was seeking their own. Not everyone was successful," he said.

Kobayashi was. His work has been exhibited at premier venues and has been written up in esteemed publications such as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. His gallery attracted writers and art lovers looking for that quintessential "only in New York" experience.

Through it all, "Kobi" expresses amazement at the fuss.

"You in the art racket, or what?" he asks a visitor, curious as to why someone would want to talk with him.

Kobayashi grew up in Honolulu, one of five children raised by a single mother. He graduated from McKinley High School before joining the Army in the mid-1940s and serving in Europe with the Allied occupation forces.

He used the GI Bill to go to art school, first at the Academy Art Center (now the Honolulu Museum of Art School). At the suggestion of his sister, who was studying in New York, he relocated, attending the Brooklyn Museum Art School.

Stays in Paris and Japan ensued, along with occasional visits to Hawaii. But from the beginning, good opportunities came to him in New York.



"Still Life in the Corner," 2012. Credit: Cindy Ellen Russell

"I got a lucky job at the Museum of Modern Art, but only as a janitor. That was the first time they hired outsiders. They never hired blacks and guys like me," he said.

He's understating his role by calling himself a janitor. The museum was installing a Japanese house and garden, and Kobayashi designed the rock garden-- he can be seen drawing swirls in the rock in a video profiling the house-- and subsequently stayed on as groundskeeper.

That connection gave him an early moment of fame. He was allowed to display his work with other aspiring artists. Then, after a fire at the museum, one of his paintings got mixed in with the museum's masterpieces and was taken to the Rockefeller Center for storage.

"So they went up to Rockefeller Center to check on the paintings and mine came, and, what the hell is this?" he said with a laugh. The incident got written up in *New Yorker* magazine.

The museum was also where he met his wife, Kate, a photographer.

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"I was going out to the warehouse to photograph something that was going out, and he had just come back from Honolulu," she said. "He was stretched out on one of the tables because he was tired."

Kobayashi left his museum job in 1978 after he and Kate bought a building in lower Manhattan for just \$35,000. Even now there's a mystery about how that was possible. The seller even offered to lower the price, but never clarified his reason for selling so low, Kobayashi said.



"Familiar Objects at the Table's Edge," 2011. Credit: Cindy Ellen Russell

The building did generate income from rentals and gave him a place to create and display his art.

Many of his pieces depict New York City life, but somehow his work seems Hawaiian in its rustic charm and re-purposed sensibility. His daughter Misa Kobayashi, a writer, believes it stems from his childhood in the Depression, "where you kept everything."

Robert Kobayashi is still working. He shipped a box of tin from New York and has a small workbench set up at the Kailua home he and his wife have moved into.

He is genuinely surprised when people express admiration for his work. Gesturing toward the last work he did in New York, he said an Australian wanted to buy it.

"Five thousand bucks! And it's only a small thing."