

Mark, Steven. "Isle artist's quirky gallery was magical in Manhattan," *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, 23 December 2015, B4.

## Star Advertiser



Robert "Kobi" Kobayashi, a leading member of the postwar generation of Hawaii-born artists who achieved mainland success, died Dec. 14 at his home in Manoa. He was 90.

His whimsical artwork, created from discarded tin roofing, depicting lively street scenes, colorful still lifes and animated characters, amused and bemused visitors to his gallery in New York's lower Manhattan for decades. It had been a butcher shop before he and his wife, Kate, a photographer, bought the building in 1977 – for \$35,000 from a mysterious seller who even offered to lower the price – and he kept the original name, Moe's Meat Market, while filling it with his paintings and sculptures, hanging some pieces from meat hooks in the windows.

In both practice and personality, Kobayashi had a gruff, reclusive manner. Moe's Meat Market was often locked, so visitors could only look through the windows, and when a Honolulu Star-Advertiser reporter visited him for an interview last year, he greeted him with, "You in the art racket or what?"

Nonetheless, his artwork was appreciated. His works are in the collections of the Honolulu Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, New York's Museum of Modern Art, Microsoft Art Collection, Nassau County Museum in New York and many other institutions. He opened a gallery in New York in 1957, the Brata Gallery, and had his first solo exhibition at Gima's Art Gallery in Honolulu in 1962. His work has been exhibited in Hawaii many times since then, including in a 2014 exhibit at the Koa Art Gallery at Kapiolani Community College.

The son of a Honolulu postal worker, Kobayashi graduated from McKinley High School and served in the Army during World War II, using GI Bill money to pursue his art studies, first at the Honolulu Academy of Art school and later the art school of the Brooklyn Museum. He chose to stay in New York, while contemporaries from Hawaii, such as Harry Tsuchidana and Satoru Abe, returned.

He eventually got a job at New York's Museum of Modern Art, initially to design and install a Japanese garden and staying on as groundskeeper though he knew little about gardening and had to go to the library to research problems when they arose.

His work at the museum gave him an early moment of fame. He was allowed to display his work with other aspiring artists, and after a fire at the museum, one of his paintings got mixed in with the museum's masterpieces and was taken to 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. The incident got written up in New Yorker magazine.

Following in the footsteps of his teacher in New York, John Ferren, Kobayashi initially painted in the abstract expressionist style, then developed a neo-pointillist style.

In the 1970s he began creating artwork out of discarded decorative tin roofing, collecting it at demolition sites as New York underwent redevelopment and gentrification. He would cut up the tin into shards, paint them, then fashion them into rustic sculptures, landscapes and other artworks. With each piece held in place with small, exposed nails, the pieces seemed to shimmer in the light, giving them energy and charm.

One critic, Karin Lipson of Newsday, said his works evoked a world "filled with mystery, with a quiet longing, and with a beauty made evanescent by all those shimmering dots."

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Kobayashi also wrote and illustrated a children's book, "Maria Mazaretti Loves Spaghetti," published by Knopf in 1991.

Beset by health problems, he moved back to Hawaii in 2014, living first in Kailua and then moving to Manoa this year.

In addition to his wife, Kobayashi is survived by sister Lillian Oasa; daughters Misa Kobayashi, Haniwa Gottlieb and Anne Kobayashi; and two granddaughters. Services have not been arranged yet.