

Grimes, William. "Robert Kobayashi, Artist of Whimsy, Dies at 90," *The New York Times*, 21 December 2015, B15.

The New York Times



Robert Kobayashi at his art gallery on Elizabeth Street in NoLita in 2009.
Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Robert Kobayashi, who delighted and mystified passers-by for decades with the whimsical displays of his art in the window of Moe's Meat Market on Elizabeth Street in the NoLita neighborhood of Lower Manhattan, died on Dec. 14, at his home in Honolulu. He was 90. His death was confirmed by his wife, Kate Keller Kobayashi.

In 1977, Mr. Kobayashi bought the building housing the butcher shop for \$35,000 and turned it into his personal gallery, mounting impromptu exhibitions of his nail-studded tin sculptures and reliefs, some of which he hung from meat hooks, and paintings and sculptures in a variety of styles.

He was an idiosyncratic artist, formally trained but closer in spirit to a folk artist in his love for scavenged tin – cans from olive oil and Café Bustelo – and a pointillist technique that lent his paintings a whimsical, childlike quality.

His window of wonders became a fixture in the neighborhood, though the door to the building remained locked, meaning that the curious could only press their noses against the glass.

"It always had a magical aspect," Phyllis Stigliano, a curator and dealer who exhibited Mr. Kobayashi's work, told *The New York Times* in 2009. "You looked through the window, and all you could see was a cat in a four-poster bed fashioned out of an old radio and a little tree made out of wood with tin ornaments."

Robert Hiroshi Kobayashi, known as Kobi, was born on May 5, 1925, in Honolulu, where his father, of Japanese descent but born in America, worked for the post office. His mother was a Japanese immigrant.

After serving with an Army tank battalion in Germany, he studied at the Academy Art Center (now the Honolulu Museum of Art School) and at the art school of the Brooklyn Museum, with the painter John Ferren.

Initially, Mr. Kobayashi painted in the dominant Abstract Expressionist style. The critic Dore Ashton, reviewing his work at New York's Brata Gallery, which Mr. Kobayashi helped found in 1957, described his canvases and a work of sculpture on view in a 1958 show as "based in a wiry, expansionist imagery composed of tensile lines vibrating from central axes." He had his first solo exhibition at Gima's Art Gallery in Honolulu in 1962.

In the mid-1960s he abandoned what he called "splashing" and developed a neo-pointillist style. In the '70s he began making works in pounded tin with raised nailheads that recalled his

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pointillist paintings. Over the years he turned out free-standing figures, still lifes, landscapes, city scenes and wall pieces.

Mr. Kobayashi neither courted nor found success with commercial galleries. For many years he worked in the warehouse of the Museum of Modern Art, which hired him in the mid-'50s as a gardener for a traditional Japanese house that was reassembled and exhibited for two years.

Mr. Kobayashi actually knew nothing about gardening.

"I just kept quiet and everyone thought I couldn't speak English," he told Alec Wilkinson, a writer for *The New Yorker* who wrote the catalog essay for "Tattooed Angel: Paintings and Sculpture by Robert Kobayashi" at the Nassau County Museum of Art in 1988. "If I came up with a horticultural problem, I ran across the street to the library and did some research."

The ever-changing display at Moe's won Mr. Kobayashi a loyal if limited following. If he waited too long to freshen the window, complaints came in.

His fans learned to expect the unexpected. Taking inventory of a display, Mr. Wilkinson, in his essay, made note of "a stool with a sneaker on each of its feet" and "a mobile with clouds revolving around an angel blowing a trumpet, made from Budweiser beer cans."

Karin Lipson, reviewing "Tattooed Angel" in *Newsday*, praised Mr. Kobayashi's talent for evoking, in his pointillist paintings, a world "filled with mystery, with a quiet longing, and with a beauty made evanescent by all those shimmering dots."

In 1991, Knopf published "Maria Mazaretti Loves Spaghetti," a children's book that Mr. Kobayashi wrote and illustrated. It told the story of an elderly neighbor, the owner of a meat store, who dishes out spaghetti to Krause the mouse, Vinny the cat and Joey the dog. She also gives three pork chops to poor Mrs. Venuto, who rewards her kindness by giving her a magic plant.

In 2000, Ms. Stigliano, the co-curator of "Tattooed Angel," joined with Mr. Kobayashi's wife to operate Moe's Meat Market as an actual art gallery. Ms. Stigliano also sold Mr. Kobayashi's work at her gallery in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

Mr. Kobayashi's first marriage ended in divorce. In addition to his wife, a photographer, he is survived by a sister, Lillian Oasa; three daughters, Misa Kobayashi, Haniwa Gottlieb and Anne Kobayashi; and two granddaughters.