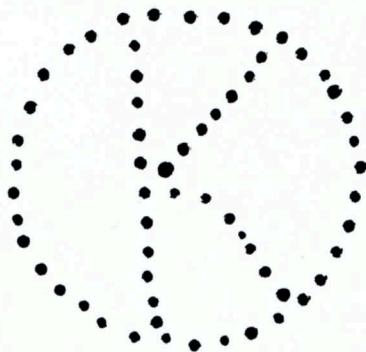




PAINTINGS & SCULPTURE BY ROBERT KOBAYASHI

Tattooed Angel

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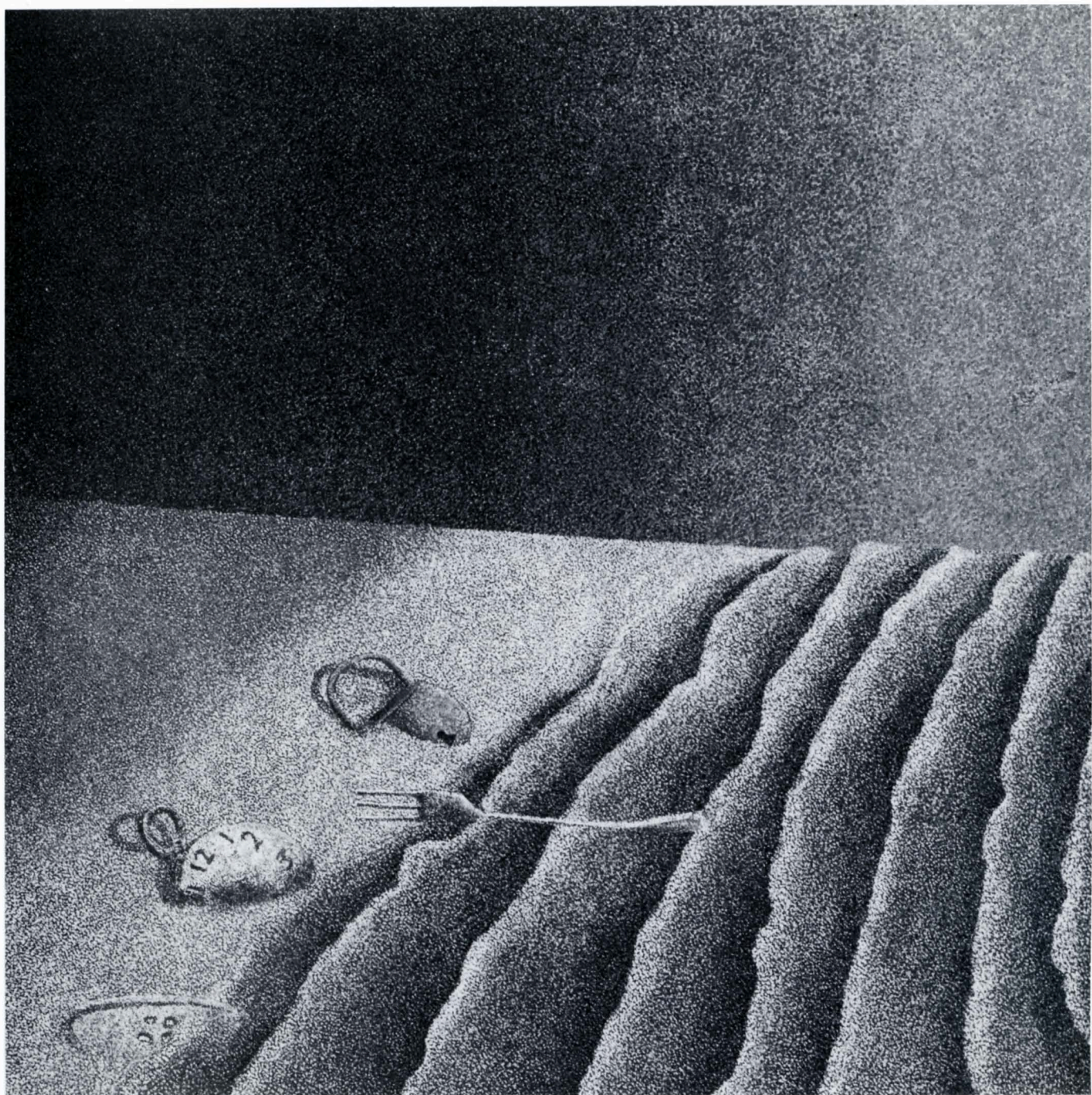


19 June — 14 August 1988

Writing by Alec Wilkinson

Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, Roslyn, New York

Curated by Phyllis Stigliano and Janice Parente



Seascape, 1980, Oil on canvas, 42½" x 42½" x 5½", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.

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Jennifer Dossin and David Marshall, New York
Kate Keller Kobayashi, New York
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Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts, New Jersey
Private Collection

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

People walking along a typical side street in Lower Manhattan are startled by a very untypical storefront on Elizabeth Street, "Moe's Meat Market." No meat is sold here. The door is locked, and the only inhabitants to be seen are a couple of cats lazing amid whimsically arranged objects and artwork that delight and amaze passersby.

For some eight years, we have marvelled at the store's changing tableaux; curious as to who the elusive "Moe" might be. Finally, through a number of unusual coincidences we met "Moe" who was revealed to be Robert Kobayashi, or as he is called, Kobi.

We are especially proud to present this exhibition of paintings, sculpture, and plaques by Robert Kobayashi. We are sincerely grateful to Kobi for his cooperation, and for designing a special installation at the Museum that is akin to a "Moe's Meat Market" display.

We thank Alec Wilkinson for his perceptive essay that accompanies this catalog. Our gratitude is extended to all the lenders who have so graciously loaned their artworks. And we are appreciative to Nicholas F. Rizzo for his valued assistance with this presentation.

We wish to express our appreciation to Ronnie Tiffany, Ben Shaffiy, and Barbara Curran for the designing and typesetting of the catalog; and to Barry Silverman and Larry Herman, Penny Lane Graphics for the fine printing and contribution made towards this publication.

We acknowledge the County Executive Thomas S. Gulotta; Robert J. McDonald, Deputy County Executive; and Marcia E. O'Brien, Executive Director, Nassau County Office of Cultural Development for their support of the Museum's projects.

We are indebted to our Director Thomas A. Saltzman, who has always enabled us to work to our potential. We are grateful to our fellow staff members Joseph H. Driscoll III, Assistant to the Director; Susan Mulroy Gettler, Curator of Education; Fernanda Bennett, Registrar; and Marguerite Stoehrer, Secretary, for their assistance with all aspects of this project.

Finally, a special thank you is extended to Kate Keller for the exhibition's photography work, and for her sensitivity to all our aspirations throughout the preparation of *Tattooed Angel*.

Janice Parente, Curator
Phyllis Stigliano, Curator



Kobi in his studio, New York City, 1984.

PAINTINGS & SCULPTURE BY ROBERT KOBAYASHI

"Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon."

Jorge Luis Borges
The Wall and the Books

Perhaps we all carry within ourselves a secret memory of the past—a childhood ball, the pattern on our mother's china, a glimpse of a restaurant from a passing car; arresting images with all the vividness of recent experience—something is found and lost again, in the flashing of an instant. Robert Kobayashi's work is about these moments, of connection, both realized and missed.

His work is both simple and clear. Simple, in that he deals with ordinary things. Clear, in that he expresses only what is essential and nothing else. Into common, everyday things Kobayashi injects surreal and fantastic elements: a little girl in *Portrait of Marie* is pictured with a cat—and the cat, three times as large as the child, stands upright, with its arm protectively around the girl's shoulders. The ordinariness of the scene is heightened to a point of extraordinariness; yet all the while maintaining its original character, the cat is still a cat, the little girl a child. Likewise, Kobayashi's use of pointillism in painting; and in sculpture, by nailing together discarded pieces of tin allows him to be at once specific and abstract; the closer one gets to the work, the more diffuse it becomes. His painting and sculpture embody what they indicate.

Robert Kobayashi studied and received recognition as a young painter in the Abstract Expressionistic style. In the

mid-sixties, however, he was influenced by the visual vitality and affirmation of spirit associated with naive or folk art. Kobayashi's intuitive play with traditional subjects—still lifes and interiors, landscapes and cityscapes, portraits and figures, has a power to gladden the heart and eye in a way that standard, academic realism does not. In his painting and sculpture, the quality of intentional innocence is underlined by an acute sensitivity to composition that is neither contrived nor disquieting, but which clarifies the selective simplicity of the imagery.

The sculpture, riddled with a network of hammered nails, attain a surprising dignity as in *Tattooed Angel*, *Standing Nude* and the small, Brancusi-like head of *Flowered Dress*. Kobayashi's attention to observed realities is often touched with irreverent humor as in the traditional reclining nude of *Black Sofa*, the bust of a woman *Nose with Thirty Nails* and *Triple Crown* where the horse assumes the pose of a human sprinter.

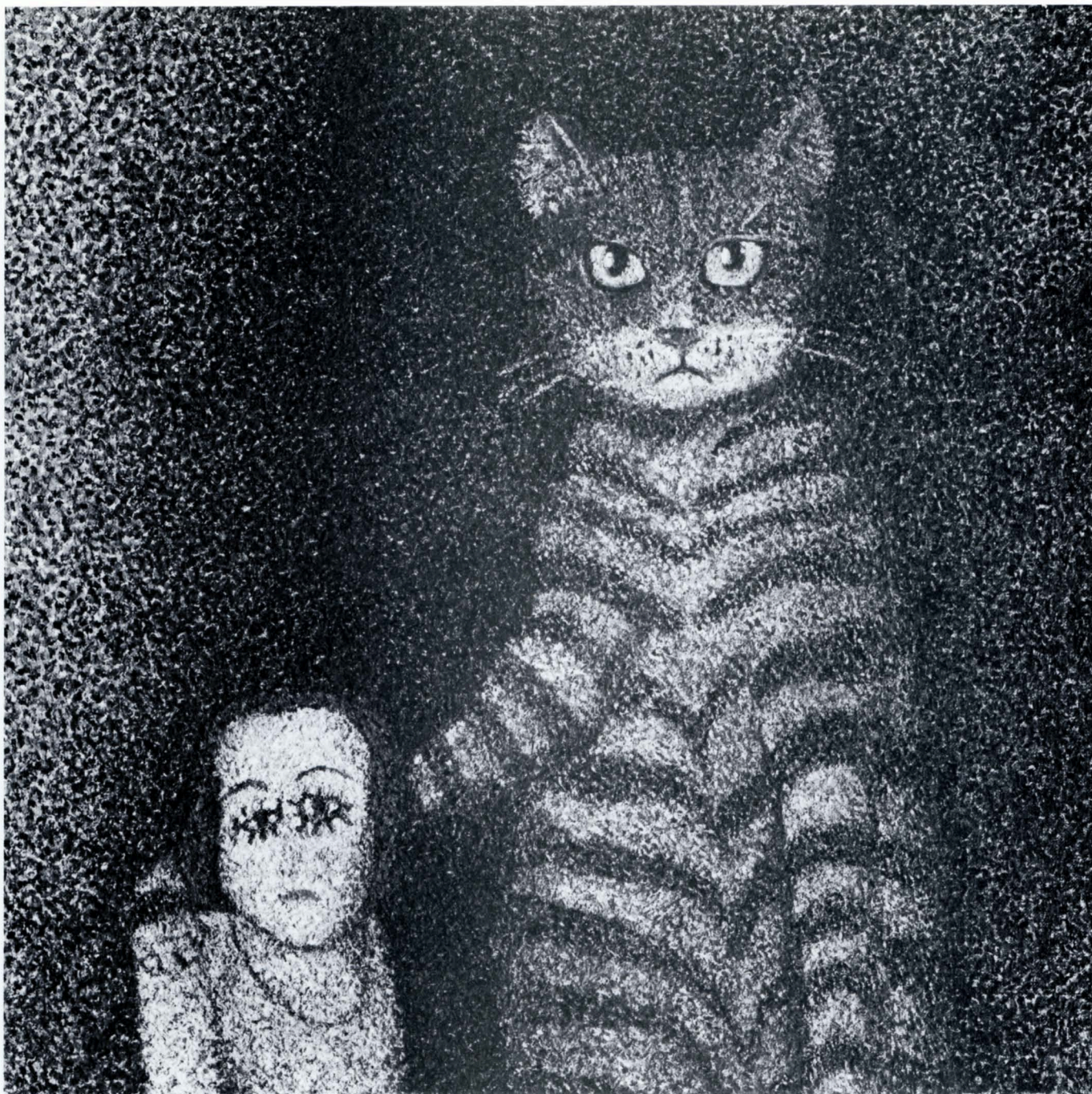
The painting reflects Kobayashi's concerns for mutability of color and spatial activity. Though a tedious method of painting, the pointillist technique allows Kobayashi to sublimate the absurd or poetic nuances of the composition. No matter how extreme the imagery, there is a wonderful atmosphere of dream-like calm in his painting, as in *Door to Balcony*, *Bent Fork* and *Woman with Roses*.

Throughout his painting and sculpture, there is an unassuming sincerity that unexpectedly enchants and delights. An open window is one thing; the labyrinth of human memory another; Robert Kobayashi, like a magician, allows us to see through one to the other.

Janice Parente, Curator
Phyllis Stigliano, Curator



Triple Crown, 1984, Nails, found pressed tin, tin on wood, 66½" x 17¼" x 23",
Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Portrait of Marie, 1977, Oil on canvas, 18" x 18" x 3", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Tattooed Angel, 1980, Nails, tin on wood, 70" x 15" x 14",
Collection Daniel Cowin, New York.



The Dish Ran Away with the Spoon, 1984, Oil on canvas, 55½" x 53¾" x 4", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



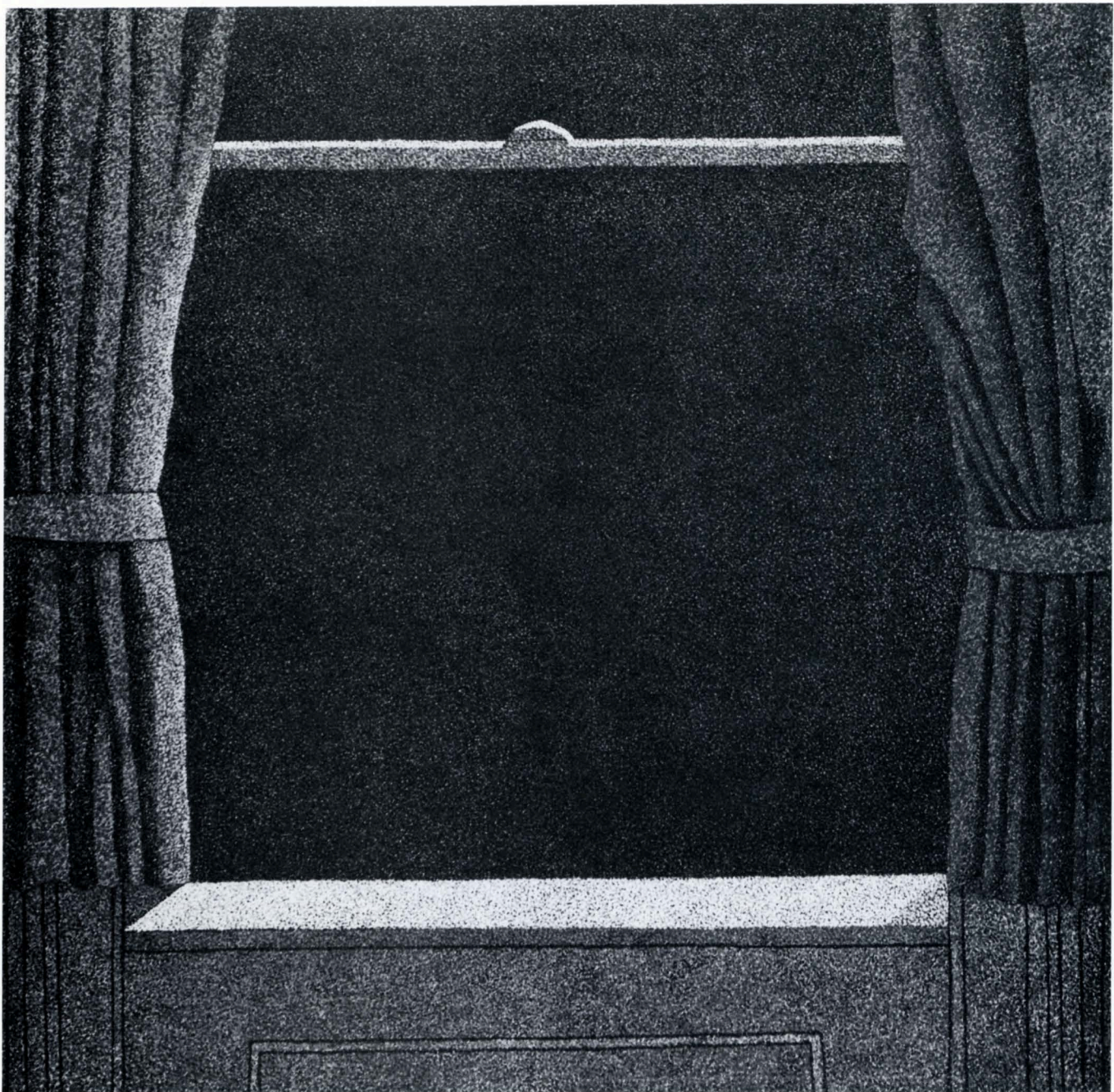
Woman with Red Roses, 1979-81, Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Bent Fork, 1977, Oil on canvas, 26" x 26" x 3¼", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Standing Nude, 1985, Nails, tin on wood, 64" x 14" x 13½", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Red Curtains, 1979-81, Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Moe's Meat Market, 1988, Elizabeth Street, New York City.

TIN

by Alec Wilkinson

THERE is an unusual storefront at 237 Elizabeth Street. Its foundation is white brick, and of its two display windows, one opens along the vertical, like a French window. It has black trim across the front, a tattered red canvas awning, a stamped-tin ceiling newly painted white, a black-and-white tile floor, and white enamelled tin walls with black highlights. The door is locked night and day, and there is never anyone inside, except a thin, striped cat who sits by the window and stares malevolently at anybody trying to attract his attention by tapping on the glass. Until 1977, it was a butcher shop, and it still says "Moe's Meat Market" on the awning and in blue-and-white letters on the plate-glass window. (At one time, there was a speakeasy-type steak house on the premises. A person chose his cut at the butcher shop and received it in a dining room in back.)

On display inside the storefront are objects that appear and are replaced mysteriously, like a joke. Among other things, lately, have been two wooden puppets the size of small children sitting on the floor and two shoulder-deep in a bulky runner boot the size of a stand-up vacuum cleaner; a collection of painted lead figures skating across a sheet of ice-colored plastic hung just above the cat's reach; a stool with a sneaker on each of its feet; and, most unusual of all, a group of portraits, busts, still-lives, and figures assembled skillfully from pieces of colored tin cut and nailed into place on a flat board or a sculpted figure. Currently there are several on view: three portraits, two of men and one of a

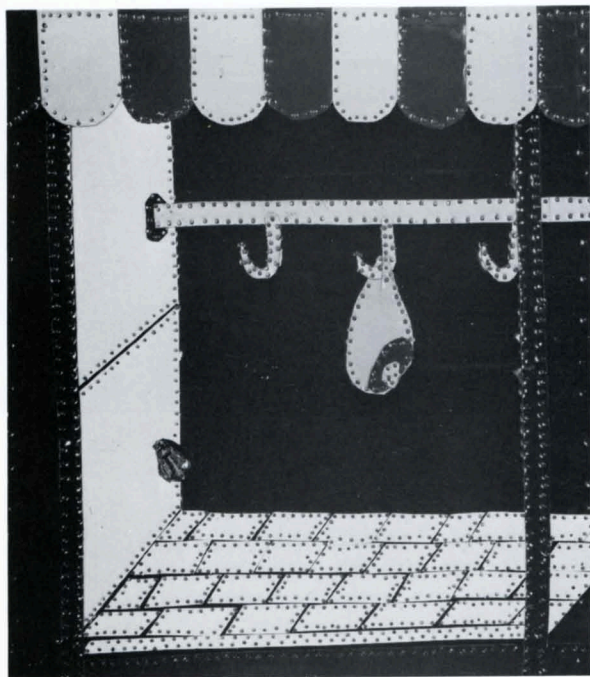
woman with a reflective, melancholy expression and a bright-red mouth; a female bust made from pieces in a red-orange floral pattern; a double-winged airplane; a scene of a cat on a porch at evening; a sculpture of a cat at rest; and a mobile with clouds revolving around an angel blowing a trumpet, made from Budweiser beer cans. A gloomy person can look at them and feel restored.

The tin pieces are the work of an interesting man named Robert Kobayashi, who owns the building, and changes their arrangement when he feels like it. The other day, we stood with him in the storefront, and while the cat played around he told us these things: "I started doing the tin pieces by accident, when I was working for the Museum of Modern Art. How I got there, they had a Japanese house that a patron had paid to have dismantled and carried over piece by piece and installed intact, and I happened to be walking by one day while they were putting it up, and a friend of mine was working on it, and seeing that I was Japanese they hired me as the gardener, even though I didn't know a thing about the trade. This was 1956, and I was painting and I needed the money, so I took the job and faked my way through the day, which was easy: I just kept quiet and everyone thought I couldn't speak English. If I came up with a horticultural problem, I ran across the street to the library and did some research.

"By the seventies, I was at the museum warehouse on Forty-ninth Street at Ninth Avenue, seeing to the packaging and transport of travelling exhi-



Cat, *Macaroni*, in Moe's Meat Market, circa 1982-3.



Mary's Butcher Shop, (Elizabeth Street, New York City), 1980, Nails, tin on wood, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 1".

bitions. I also had access to the carpentry shop, and I was standing there one day because my wife wanted a frame for a mirror and I didn't know what to do. I'm thinking *frame, frame, frame*, and then I saw all these glue cans in the corner—Henry's Glue, which we used to set insulation on the insides of packing crates. I cut them up, and I got some yellow photographic chemical cans, and some red Coke cans with the stripe on them, and some beer cans that the guys from the Seven Santini Brothers movers who used to come and help us with the sculpture left behind, and cut them up and tacked them on a wooden frame, and it looked pretty good. I made a few more frames during the time when there was nothing to do between shows, and then I started pounding pieces together to make little abstractions. The first figurative one was a pastoral scene—a house with some hills—and I gave it to a friend. I kept it at it because I liked it and because I saw a lot of art coming through the museum and no one was working in tin, although sometime later I did hear of somebody in California who was doing abstractions, and I thought 'That's strange—he's pounding tin, I'm pounding tin.'

"I did a lot of New York scenes—windows, portraits, imaginative scenes, things I would see from the window of a bus on the way to New Jersey. I did *Mary's Butcher Shop* across the street, I did storefronts in the neighborhood, candy shops in the night; I had a whole row of social clubs. I did the mortician on Mulberry Street, between Prince Street and Spring Street—the one with the all-night phone. The airplane I did at the museum. This portrait is of my friend ??? Tingley, the ????. The blue background and the dark glasses are from a Bazzini peanut can, and the white for the face is from a glue can.

"I use four tools: a cutter, pliers to shape the tin, and ice pick to make holes for the nails, and a ball-peen hammer to drive home the nails. I

have to be very careful with the pliers because I like to keep the tin pristine. Also, people like to run their hands across the surface, so I try to keep it as smooth as possible. The pieces are nailed to oak. On the sculptures—the cat, the plane, the mobile, the bust—the tin is nailed to a wooden form, which I make first.

“I used to go around Chinatown and pick up cookie cans from the restaurants and olive-oil cans in Little Italy. Chinese cookie cans have great images on them: tigers, and lions, and fancy birds, and butterflies, and cars. Italian olive-oil cans have fairly intricate, decorative backgrounds, usually floral patterns. You can only use a certain portion of the can—not the label and not usually any parts with writing—and you need about five cans for a small piece. English cookie tins have good colors, which I’m forced to buy from Dean & DeLuca. A couple of years ago, the guy who runs the hardware store next door told me about aluminum siding, so I don’t have to look for white tin anymore. Except for a few kinds of beer, regular American cans have no fun in them.

“People all over the city now collect cans for me. They’ll drink some coffee and bring me the can and say ‘Kobi, you can make something with this.’ I can’t refuse. The Italian kids in the neighborhood save soda cans. They come with their schoolbags loaded up and stand on the sidewalk in front of my window and yell ‘Hey, Kobi’ in that deep, strained kind of Marlon Brando voice. I wonder where they get that voice from. I get Bazzini peanut cans, the blue-and-white ones with the picture of the elephant and his trunk wrapped around an enormous peanut, from a Japanese bartender. He serves peanuts with his drinks and calls me when he has enough. My mother-in-law in California sends me cans. I get a package and think, ‘Oh, boy, what could this be?’ and I open it up, and what is it? It’s empty cans.”



Installation Moe's Meat Market, circa 1980.



Installation Moe's Meat Market, circa 1983.

ROBERT KOBAYASHI (KOBI)

1925 Born 5 May, Honolulu, Hawaii
Resides on Elizabeth Street, New York City with wife,
Kate and daughter, Misa

EDUCATION

1946-48 Honolulu School of Art, Hawaii
1949 The Brooklyn Museum Art School, New York
1950 Studied and painted in Paris
1960 Studied and painted in Japan

SELECTED ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

1962 Honolulu. Gima's Gallery, *Paintings by Kobayashi*,
19 March-7 April.
1980 New York. Equator, *Moe's Meat Market: Collage and
Sculpture by Kobi*, 27 September-31 October.
1981 New York. Josef Gallery, *Kobayashi: Constructions in Tin*,
6-27 June.
1981-82 Scottsdale, Arizona. OK Harris West, *Kobayashi: Con-
structions in Tin and Wood*, 4 December-2 January.
1984 New York. Moe's Meat Market (Exhibition presented by
Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts), *Robert Kobayashi: Recent
Sculpture*, 29 November-21 December.
1987 Roseland, New Jersey. Corporate Headquarters of
Automatic Data Processing (ADP), Inc., *Clouage by
Robert Kobayashi*, 17 April-8 June.



Installation at Josef Gallery, New York.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1949 New York. Argent Gallery, *23 New Painters Presented by
John Ferren*, 15-27 May.
1950 New York. Kootz Gallery, *New Talent Show-1950*.
1959 New York. Brata Gallery.
1968-70 New York. The Museum of Modern Art, Circulating
Exhibitions Department, July-October. Artwork sent to
the United States Embassy Residence in Budapest.
1970 New York. The Museum of Modern Art, Art Lending
Service (to Museum Penthouse), July-August.
1970-1 New York. The Museum of Modern Art, Art Lending
Service (to Time-Life Building, New York),
December-April.
1978 Syracuse, New York. Everson Museum of Art. *The
Animal Kingdom in American Art*, 5 February-2 April.
Organized by Peg Weiss. Catalog.
1982 New York. 80 Washington Square East Galleries, New
York University, *Small Works*, 30 January-26 February.
Juried by Nancy Hoffman.
1982-3 New York. Ericson Gallery, *Animal Life: Contemporary
Representations*, 7 December-8 January. Curated by
Michael Florescu.
1983 Brooklyn, New York. The Brooklyn Museum, *The Great
East River Bridge 1883-1983*, 19 March-19 June. Catalog.
New York. Asian American Arts Centre, *Eye to Eye*,
23-30 June. Catalog.
1984 New York. Ricco Johnson Gallery, *Red Dog Running:
New Discoveries in 20th Century Folk and Outsider Art*,
15 November-15 December.
1985 New York. The Museum of Modern Art, (the reinstalla-
tion of contemporary galleries), 12 February-17 March.
1986-7 New York. The Museum of Modern Art, *Contemporary
Works From the Collection*, 7 November-13 April.

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23-30 June.

Periodicals

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9 August, pp. 15-16.
1962 "Noted and Noteworthy." *Star Bulletin*, Honolulu, 18
March, p. 16 (illustration).
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24 March.

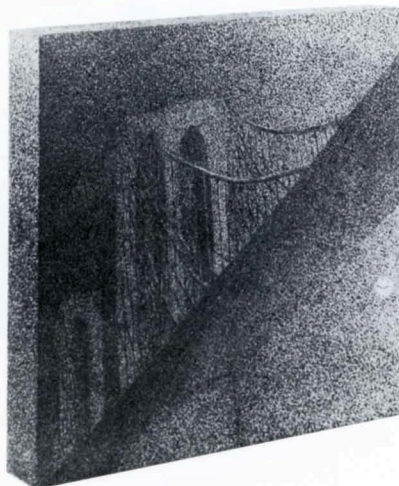
- 1980 Slesin, Suzanne. "Kobi, Tin Man." *The New York Times*/Home Beat, 9 October, p. C3, (illustration).
- 1981 Florescu, Michael. "Robert Kobayashi." *Arts Magazine*, November, Vol. 56, No. 3, p. 10 (illustration).
Hardway, Francine. "Art: Tin and Tenements." *New Times*, Phoenix, 9-15 December, p. 35 (illustration).
- 1987 Gottesman, Alice and Donald, Linda. "They Do Windows: Notable Displays." *The Village Voice*, 7 January .

AWARDS

- 1948 Honolulu School of Art Annual Show
John Freitas Prize
Honolulu, Hawaii
- 1950 New York City International House
First Prize
- 1958 John Hay Whitney Foundation
Fellowship
New York, New York

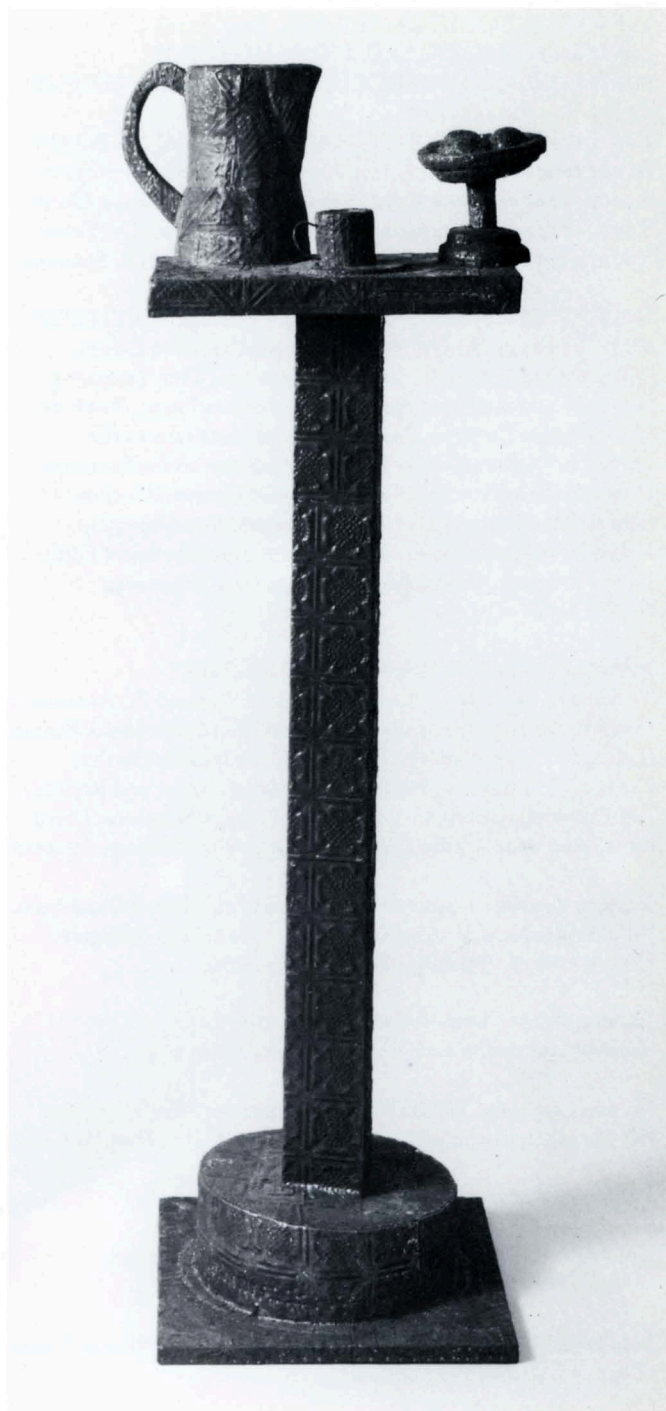
PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- The Brooklyn Museum
Brooklyn, New York
- The Museum of Modern Art
New York, New York
- The Prudential
Newark, New Jersey



Photograph: The Brooklyn Museum

The Brooklyn Bridge, 1982, Oil on canvas, 18½" x 18⅝" x 2¾",
Collection The Brooklyn Museum, 83.25,
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ivan C. Karp.



Three Plums, 1984, Nails, found pressed tin on wood, 62¼" x 21" x 17¼",
Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of General Felt Industries, Knoll.

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Door to Balcony, 1984, Oil on canvas, 49¼" x 48" x 2¾",
Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.



Flowered Dress, 1984, Nails, tin on wood, 11" x 8" x 4½"
Courtesy of the Artist and Nicholas F. Rizzo Fine Arts.

Tattooed Angel