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Tadaaki Kuwayama's *Aesthetics of Infinity*

by Robert C. Morgan

Gary Snyder Projects March 7 – May 24, 2008

Bjorn Ressle Fine Art March 12 – April 19, 2008



Kuwayama, "TK5182-3/4'75" (1975).
Acrylic metallic paint on canvas with aluminum strips, 82 x 82 in.



Kuwayama, On the wall: TK1594-½ -93, Twelve Metallic pink & silver on bakelite. 1993, each 94 ½ x 8 inches. On the floor: TK74-½-03, Six Anodized aluminum discs. 2003

Minimal art of the sixties has many divergent sources emanating from many cultural influences. The early Russian Suprematists and Constructivists were clearly seminal in this movement at least forty years before the Americans came on the scene. The generally accepted history is that the Americans led the way to reductive form in the early sixties, but as we know – or, at least, should know – art movements rarely, if ever, emerge out of the void. If one looks closely enough, there are certain to be antecedents and influences that extend beyond the categorical packaging to which Modernism has been subjected over the decades of the previous century. One of the important early antecedents to Minimal art is Tadaaki Kuwayama, an artist who was particularly close to Donald Judd and Dan Flavin.

Born in Nagoya, Japan, Kuwayama came with his wife, the artist, Rakuko Naito, to the United States in 1958, roughly the same time as Yayoi Kusama and Yoko Ono. By 1960-61, he had already developed a reputation as a reductivist painter through his association with such important gallerists as Richard Bellamy and Bruno Bischofberger. Over the years, Kuwayama's work gradually evolved from a singular emblematic style of painting towards a more total installation or environmental sensibility. In his extraordinary translucent paintings from the early seventies, on view at Gary Snyder Projects, one senses the power of the first appearance of Minimal art in New York. Although Kuwayama was working reductively as a painter throughout the sixties, it was in the seventies that his paintings caught the attention of European museums. One may see in these large-format square surfaces, intersected by diagonal and cross-diagonal cuts (1974), the sensibility of a real purist. The surrounding space resonates within the frame of these paintings, as the surfaces are perfected to the point that they shimmer with light. At the time, Kuwayama began working with metallic pigments mixed into blue and beige acrylic. 180-degree arc, we see silver, beige and grey in three bands. The evenness and articulation of the color is so accurate and so precise it is difficult to believe the paintings were made by a human hand.

The entire cubic space of Gary Snyder Projects glows in the radiance of these paintings. It is interesting to see these works in retrospect and to realize that art history is still a mystery. Despite whatever may appear most important at any given time, particularly in a competitive market place, the collector need only take a few steps backward to see the vitality and vibrancy in the plastic arts that has been overlooked. There is a paradoxical calm and silent urgency to these paintings. They are works that will literally take your breath away. The paintings suggest the breathing of air and the emptiness of space, a visionary journey beyond the commonplace that heralds the possibility of a culture reinventing itself. Kuwayama's vision does not require an elitist conceptual strategy. It is an aesthetic reality that easily disappears unless one takes the time to sense its presence.

His recent spatial constructions, involving aluminum and Bakelite repetitive forms, fill the space so as to negate any separation between repeated forms and their architectural surroundings. In the more recent work, shown at Bjorn Ressle Gallery, Kuwayama installed six cylinders in an equidistant modular floor installation. Each module measures three inches high with a diameter of four and a half inches, extruded in solid aluminum. Three of them are fabricated in a highly polished silver, and three are anodized and polished in gold. This untitled work (original 2002) occupies a location on the floor toward the rear of the one-room gallery. This and other works, all untitled, comprise a singular installation that appears inextricably bound to the structure and space of the room. Other works include a series of silver and pink vertical bars, mounted on aluminum supports, on a long wall in an equidistant row. Another consists of four small aluminum squares, made from two equal bars, each anodized in bright red. A third involves Mylar sheets with single vertical and horizontal lines drawn with a metallic pencil.

Together, these works give an "emptiness" to the space that, for Kuwayama, suggests a Zen Buddhist aesthetic. In the process, they remind us of our equilibrium as we move through the space. Although intuitively placed, they appear so precisely calculated as to evoke a heightened sense of being. Kuwayama does not deny the essential materiality of his work. Rather he is concerned with how the act of perceiving this materiality as a modular sequence of forms gives us the exacting quietude of a spiritual experience. His installations aspire towards a phenomenological reality, perhaps best articulated in Western terms by the philosopher Edmund Husserl who employed the term, *epoche*, to describe a means of bracketing objects within the space of perception. Kuwayama's extraordinary focus and attentiveness to the specificity of his environment gives his work a quality of Zen transcendence, a reversal of form as pure space.

These two visually and conceptually interactive exhibitions are as much about the process of seeing as a heightened form of sensory cognition as anything I have currently viewed in New York. Yet there is a space between the seventies and the nineties of nearly twenty years that is not represented here, where much of the work exists in the collections of European and Japanese museums. Tadaaki Kuwayama is an artist who basically keeps to himself. His work is his life. He follows a practical routine on a daily basis. He works whether or not he is preparing for an exhibition. In recent years, he prefers the concept of the installation as a site-specific environment. He works from an architectural premise using topographic charts and specifications for every space in which he shows. For both exhibitions, at Bjorn Ressle and Gary Snyder, he visited the galleries on numerous occasions in order to study the space and take measurements. His point is that the visual experience cannot be separated from the architecture. Yet at the same time he understands the architecture less as a container for art, and more as a kind of reciprocal agreement between form and form. One form must interact decisively and precisely with another. Only in this way can the artist achieve the aesthetics of infinity, and the true reversal of form as space. It is the spatial transcendence of form that he envisions, not from a stereotypical Modernist idea, but from the perspective of an acute Asian sensibility where everything counts until the manifestation of the initial thought is achieved. Only then will he know that he has discovered the correct moment in which art becomes a present reality.

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/04/artseen/tadaaki-kuwayamas-aesthetics-of-infinity>