

Into the Twenty-first Century

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

There is a breathtaking sense of spatial and color purity in the art of Tadaaki Kuwayama, the Japanese-born artist long resident in the United States. To view his art is to enter into a world of contemplation with both the world at large and oneself.



Tadaaki Kuwayama, *Untitled*, 1992/2012, anodized aluminum, 22 elements, each 8 x 8 x 2 1/4 inches

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 not only close to Donald Judd and Dan Flavin, but was working in advance of them with reductive Minimal forms. One might say that Kuwayama was not a Minimalist, but a reductive painter who became a Minimalist by way of association with artists that he admired and, concomitantly, artists who admired his work. If one reviews the history—not the “official” history—one understands that Kuwayama’s place in this time period is strategically present. In many ways, he opened ways for other artists not only to see but to understand conceptually the importance of working in a reductive manner as signaling a new approach to art somewhere between late industry and the virtual age of digital forms—forms that emit a language consistent with the twenty-first century, with all their elegant and paradoxical beauty.

Born in 1932, 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 1960–1961, he had already developed a reputation 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 toward a more total installation or environmental sensibility. In his extraordinary translucent paintings from the early 1970s, shown at Gary Snyder Projects in 2008, one sensed the power of the first appearance of Minimal art in New York. Although Kuwayama was working reductively as a painter throughout the 1960s, it was in the 1970s 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 purist. The surrounding space resonates within the frame of these paintings, as the surfaces are perfected to the point that they shimmer with light.

Thirty-eight years before these paintings were shown in 2008, at Gary Snyder Projects, the artist began working with metallic pigments mixed into blue and beige acrylic. In a 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 was difficult to believe that they were actually painted. Their resonance appears similar to Brancusi’s *Bird in Space* (1918), for example, which was entirely carved and cast by hand, combining tactile sensation and optic nerve. Working as an artist in relative isolation in the 1970s, Kuwayama wanted to make a surface with metallic paints so exacting and so “industrial” in its appearance that human perception would be challenged to identify with the trace of nature in such paintings. These works impress me as particularly Japanese where the laws of nature extend into industrial materials and processes, then beyond industry into the invisibility of digital codes where form is translated into nanoseconds and transmitted from one point to another. According to the French philosopher Paul Virilio, speed has entered into aesthetics. But Virilio failed to see that his idea was intrinsically Asian long before it evolved as a postmodern concept in the West.

Gary Snyder Gallery glows in the radiance of three new sets of work. Kuwayama’s spatial constructions, involving repetitive forms in aluminum, Bakelite, and titanium, fill the space so as to negate any separation from their architectural surroundings. For the most recent work, Kuwayama installed eight titanium panels on the floor of an extended corridor in the rear of the gallery. In contrast to other equidistant modular floor installations, such as the cylindrical modules shown in various museums in Japan over the past three years, the titanium work (*Untitled*, 2011) is neither round nor solid, but consists of small panels, each holding a variant light capacity. Instead of positioning the panels in a rigorous Minimal format in which each panel is exact in its parallel and perpendicular arrangement, the titanium panels are set at slight diagonal angles to one another. As one walks the length of the corridor in which they are placed, the light changes on the surface of each plate. The variance of the color is determined by one’s position (and height) in relation to how one moves through the corridor. Therefore, the unified works of eight panels becomes a single work or, what I spoke about in an essay in 1999, the reversibility of form into a feeling of pure space.

Two other sets of work are equally as rigorous in both concept and execution. One, a 22-part modular piece placed at equidistant intervals along a short and long wall, fabricated in aluminum and anodized in red, reinforces the notion of a dynamic space. Each module is eight inches square in two parts and they are placed on alternating vertical and horizontal axis across the two walls. Dated 2003, this work adjusts to the wall space available. In each installation, the intensification of the space is greatly enhanced. In the earliest dated piece, (1993), eight 24 x 24 inch Bakelite squares are formed by three-inch bars. Again, each composite module is placed equidistantly in a small gallery facing street level in this discreetly designed tenth floor gallery space. The difference between these two earlier works and the most recent titanium plates (each adhered to the floor with two screws) is the complexity of variation in terms of shifting color—in the titanium piece—and the static square format and solid colors in the early works. Another major difference, of course, is the fact that the titanium panels rest on the floor at equal—more or less—intervals, whereas the anodized red aluminum and silver Bakelite modular works are destined to be hung at eye level on their respective walls.

Together, these works gave “emptiness” to the space that, for Kuwayama suggests a Buddhist aesthetic. In the process, they suggested a feeling of equilibrium as we move through the space. Although intuitively placed, they appeared so precisely calculated as to evoke a heightened sense of reckoning with simple forms. 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 toward a phenomenological reality, perhaps best articulated in Western terms by the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) 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.

The recent exhibition at Gary Snyder Gallery—which has replaced the old Gary Snyder Projects on West 26th Street—is as much about the process of seeing as it allows a heightened form of sensory cognition. Kuwayama is an artist who basically keeps to himself: his work is his life. He follows a practical work routine in his studio as a daily regimen. In recent years, his preference has moved increasingly toward the installation in relation to a site-specific environment. His ideas evolve from an architectural premise using topographic charts and specifications for every space in which he shows. His point is that the visual experience of seeing and experiencing his forms cannot be separated from the architecture. At the same time, he understands that architecture is less a container for art than a reciprocal agreement between forms. One form must interact decisively and precisely with another. Only in this way can the artist achieve an aesthetic of infinity, and thus, 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 present reality.

One could make the claim that the kind of “pure space” advocated by Kuwayama is not so much a tragic space in the ancient Greek sense of Aeschylus or Euripides as an evocation, an opening or a threshold, that allows for a moment or moments of elevation beyond the banalities that pull us down into the gravity of our existential reality or the even denial of that reality. Kuwayama has described the desired effect of his art as being “something not of this world.” In other words, to transcend what we already know through the mass media and through the tragic events that surround us. He is not concerned whether emitting expressive content or signifying a social truth has offered a new global paradigm for art. Fundamentally, Kuwayama is interested in the kind of rarefied experience that can be obtained through his form of total art. What he describes as “something not of this world” is indeed a perception of infinity, a rare glimpse of something to which human beings have not yet fully acculturated in terms of bringing together a sense of spiritual and material being.

Even so, Kuwayama’s art is fundamentally concerned with the act of perception—indeed, the viewer’s experience—through the reversal of form as a spatial field whereby the material focus is transformed into the arena of “pure space.” In this sense, his concerns as an artist are far removed from the pragmatic objectivity of Minimal art. Yet, at the same time, Kuwayama does not deny the essential materiality of his work, which is close to the Minimal aesthetic, specifically in the works of Judd and Flavin. Kuwayama is specifically concerned with how the act of perceiving materiality presented in the form of a modular sequence of forms gives us the exacting quietude of contemplation where the spiritual and material are fully united.

Kuwayama combined old and newer works in his exhibitions. The modular elements are variable in number and placement. Therefore, the site specificity is essential to his work. His art is both immanent and transcendent in that it deals with the construction of the modular elements in a way that is difficult to ignore their materiality, yet equally pointing to a direction beyond materials—beyond physicality—as if to suggest transcendence. Less about removing themselves entirely from the physical world, Kuwayama’s Minimalist modules—and I question whether this is the proper language to use in speaking about his work—appear to restrain themselves from overpowering the space. The particular tension that the artist is attempting to reveal is how scale, color, and material require a reduction of their obvious complexity in order to transform the appearance of where they are placed into “pure space.” The more I reflect on Kuwayama’s art over the past two decades, the more I begin to grasp what he means by “pure space” in relation to his work. Without attention to the elements within form, the release of “pure space” as a transcendent environment could not exist. In some way, this implies the true majesty of his work, the true innovation, which is, as much an East Asian concept as a Minimalist ploy, almost as if it were hovering in an aesthetic ether, somewhere else.