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RAKUKO NAITO

Alison Bradley Projects

November 4 - December 11, 2021

Curated by Gabriela Rangel

Alison Bradley, Principal

Ise Henriques Sharp, Gallery Associate

Eimi Tagore-Erwin, Curatorial Assistant

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Introduction

Throughout her career, Rakuko Naito (b. Tokyo, 1935) has explored different avenues of abstraction on her own terms, privileging poetic decisions over art historical labels, such as Op art, hard-edge, minimalism, and geometric abstraction. Her aesthetic choices reflect the means found in a particular moment and a fluid dialogue between tradition, avant-garde, and contemporaneity.

Naito is a graduate of the prestigious Tokyo National University of Art, where she studied *nihonga*, a traditional Japanese painting style in contrast to *yōga*, Western-style oil painting. Nihonga entails the use of water-based mineral pigments mixed with deerskin or animal glue applied to paper, silk, or wood; it has rigid technical rules, but artists like Naito with nihonga training can introduce new formats and themes while maintaining a predetermined subject. Naito moved to New York City in 1958, where she began to distance herself from the constraints of her traditional education—she attended the Arts Students League after the rave of Abstract Expressionism and witnessed the emergence of Pop Art and Post-Painterly Abstraction.

In the 1960s, Naito started to use acrylic paint, an “American material” that she was introduced to by her friend and fellow abstract painter Sam Francis. While maintaining Japanese techniques, she produced two series of monochromatic paintings—one in which she outlined geometric shapes resulting in spatial demarcations, and another creating variations of geometric regularity to produce vibrations through the moiré effect. These works manifest Naito’s desire to break with—or at least to defy—the sensation of flatness: “*Japanese art is flat, so my main concern was to challenge flatness.*”

Over the past three decades, Naito has furthered her explorations of geometry and natural forms and textures, dedicating herself to research into the malleability and strength of *kozo* and *mino washi*, traditional Japanese papers. Her works have taken form as an on-going series of organic “paper reliefs” that she tears, folds, burns or rolls inside a thin box. In these works, Naito subtly disarrays clear and precise patterns, producing disorder in otherwise systematically serial compositions—creating a reality that she views as transcending the limits of painting and drawing. Her series of sculptural mesh cages explore the materiality of paper-made structures and the rigidity of metal, probing the tensions between space and material, lightness, and weight.

Press Release

Alison Bradley Projects is pleased to present *RAKUKO NAITO*, curated by Gabriela Rangel.

The exhibition highlights representative works from the six decades long career of New York based Rakuko Naito (b. Tokyo, 1935) and is the first major gallery survey of the artist, showcasing early monochromatic paintings, a tinted photo-collage, and more recent paper and mesh cage sculptural works. Selected by Rangel, an independent curator and writer, the works on view aim to shed light on the artist's unique practice, drawing on her early studies and utilization of traditional Japanese painting techniques to challenge pictorial flatness in conversation with the art of her time and in a truly New York practice of experimentation.

RAKUKO NAITO focuses on the artist's lifelong engagement privileging poetic decisions over art historical labels such as Op art, hard-edge, minimalism and geometric abstraction, decisions which kept her exploring different avenues of abstraction in her own terms.

Trained in *nihonga*, literally translated as Japanese painting style (*nihon* meaning Japan and *ga* meaning painting in Japanese) and different to the Western-style oil painting (*yōga*), Rakuko Naito arrived in New York along with Tadaaki Kuwayama, her husband and fellow artist, at the end of the 1950s. She was in her early twenties at the time and became fully immersed in the creativity, and society, of artists in New York.

In the early 1960s, influenced by the rave of Abstract Expressionism and the emergence of Pop Art, Naito distanced herself from the constraints of her traditional education. The artist started to use acrylic paint, an "American material" that she was introduced to by her friend and fellow abstract painter Sam Francis and began to use it on canvas while questioning flatness: *Japanese art is flat, so my main concern was to challenge flatness*. She worked on a series of monochromatic paintings on which she outlined geometric shapes resulting in spatial demarcations and, in another series of the same period, created variations of geometric regularity to produce vibrations through the moiré effect. These works manifest her desire to break with, or at least to defy, the sensation of flatness.

In the 1970s, Naito's practise moved away from abstract painting to representational works, often large scale, of nature and mostly of flowers. In defiance of the wave of conceptualism in New York, a tendency that privileged the dematerialization of the art object in favor of an idea, she worked on her own terms and chose subjects she favored to contemplate. In 1978 she had a solo exhibition, *Monumental Flower Paintings*, at the then Charleston Art Gallery of Sunrise (now the Juliet Art Museum) and curated by Jay Frederick Cain.

From the early 1990s, Naito left her painting practice and began to work with photography, collage and sculptural works. At this time Naito developed a series of black and white photo-collages with dye tint representing floral motifs, stones, water, wood, and sky close ups composed as diptychs. Concurrently she began to produce sculptural mesh cages, resonant of the geometric shapes of her paintings created in the 1960s. Within these cages are paper-made structures that counterbalance the rigidity of the metal, infusing her unique sense of tension of space and material, lightness and weight.

For the past three decades, Naito has dedicated her artistic work to research into the malleability and strength of *kozo* and *mino washi*, traditional Japanese papers, manifest as an on-going series of organic compositions that she tears, folds, burns or rolls inside a thin box. The artist's "paper reliefs" seem clear and precise, yet possess a subtle feature of disarray to their patterns, resulting in a commotion to an otherwise systematically serial composition. These works reflect her interest in geometry, architecture and the natural forms and textures of the material creating a reality which she views as transcending the limits of painting and drawing.

Rakuko Naito currently works and resides in New York City with her husband Tadaaki Kuwayama.



RN821-65 (1965)

Signed & dated on verso

Acrylic on canvas

21 x 21 in

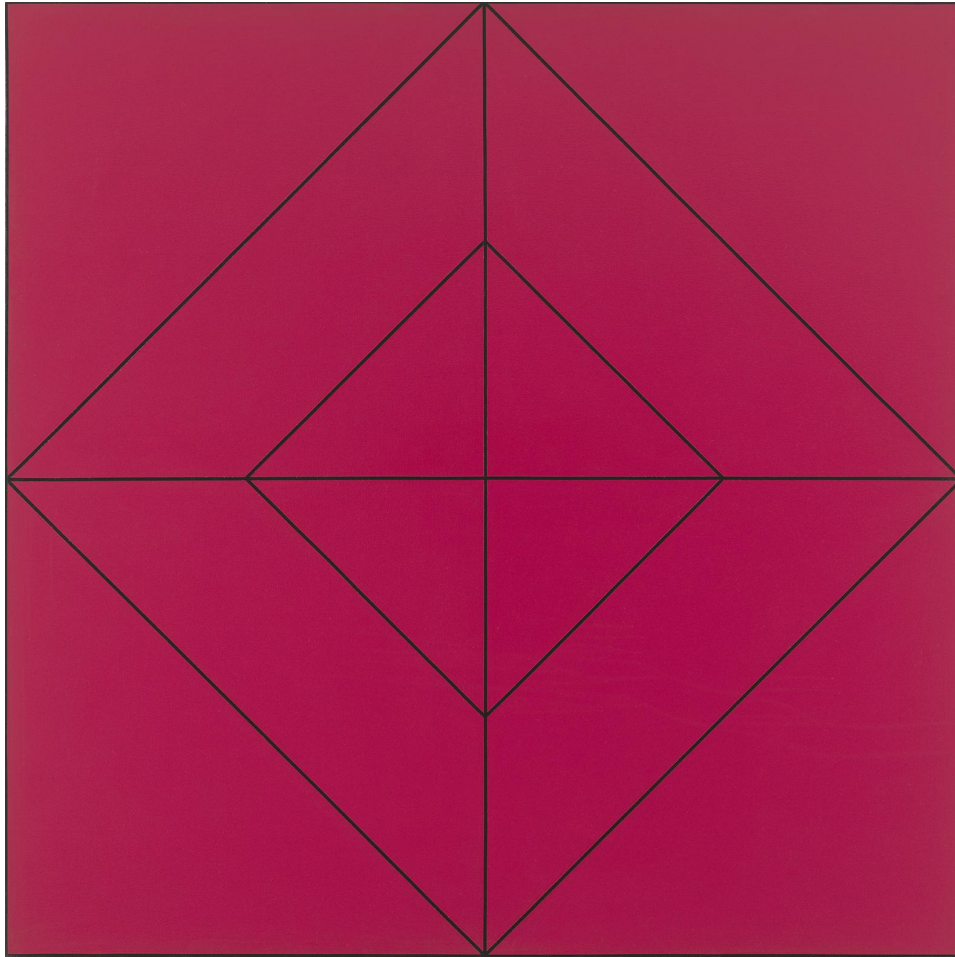
53.3 x 53.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

By the end of the 1950s, vibration became a relevant term for many artists and groups in Europe, Asia, and South America, reflecting theoretical discussions on real and virtual movement. By 1960, two important exhibitions propelled Kinetic and Op Art tendencies in which movement was central: *Bewogen Beweging* at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René in Paris. These tendencies also aimed to redefine painting and the role of the viewer as key principles for their aesthetic research. A few years later in 1965, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented *The Responsive Eye*, an exhibition curated by William Seitz featuring optical or retinal art. The show traveled to Saint Louis, Pasadena, Seattle, and Baltimore, gathering an important number of international artists, including Americans who—according to many critics—did not fit into the general curatorial discourse developed in the show.

Between 1964 and 1965, Rakuko Naito created a series of small-scale monochromatic paintings in which she applied a *moiré-effect* pattern to activate the canvas. The moiré effect is an optical vibration produced when a set of straight or curved lines is superposed onto another. The painting selected for this exhibition features a diamond-shaped vibrational figure applied on a red acrylic monochrome canvas. Naito also applied a black frame-contour, a stylistic feature that later she would develop further in her “paper relief” series in which the compositions are framed by a box.



RN268-66 (1966)

Signed & dated on verso

Acrylic on canvas

68 x 68 in

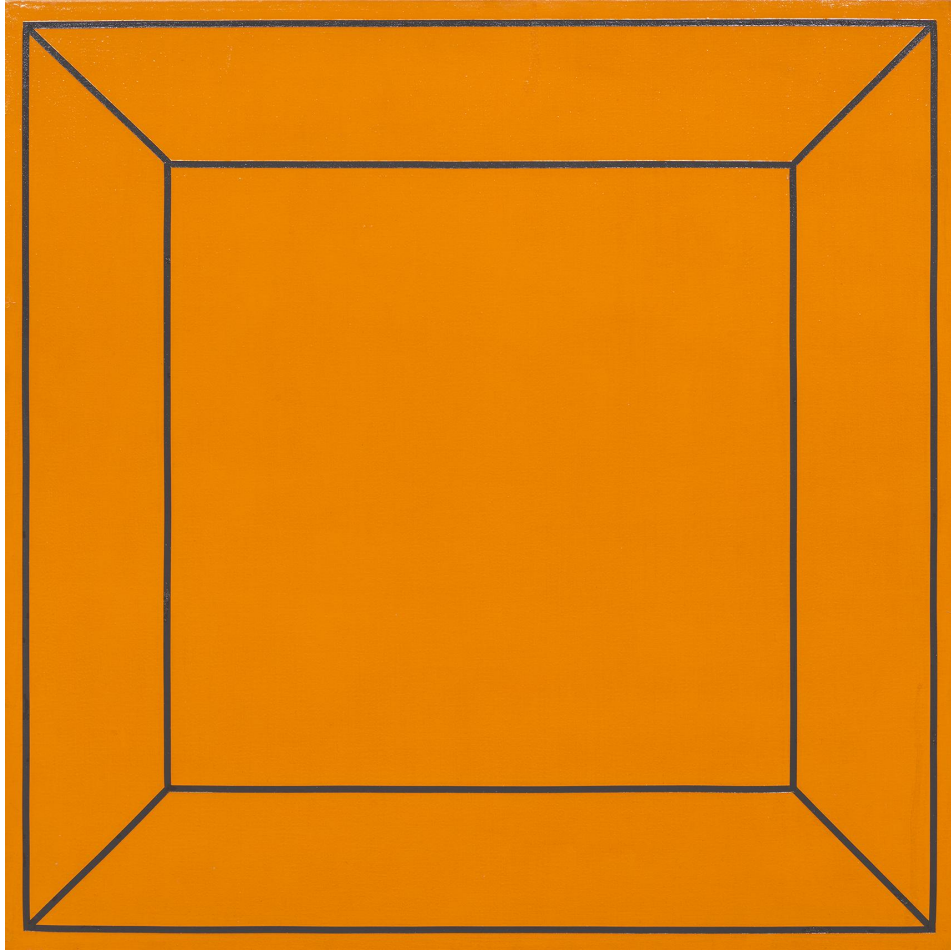
172.7 x 172.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

By the end of the 1950s, acrylic paint began to be widely used by artists in New York. Naito pointed out that it was artist Sam Francis who first suggested the use of acrylic paint to her, a truly American material, allowing her to venture into techniques that offered the artist less strictures. The artist went one step forward in her exploration of new available materials, creating a series of stunning monochromes.

Between the 1910s and the 1920s, Kazimir Malevitch and Alexander Rodchenko made monochromatic paintings that generated aesthetic debates about the autonomy of art and spirituality. Following the end of World War II, these debates gained even more traction. In the 1950s, Yves Klein reinterpreted the monochrome, creating a strong connection between the works and the viewer. In contrast, Piero Manzoni made his *Achrome* series as a way to explore the absence of color. The three monochromes by Rakuko Naito selected for this exhibition feature geometric imprints or patterns that emphasize the object over any gestural expression. Moreover, the intense color hues chosen by Naito (including a seemingly neutral color such as grey) underscore the presence of the work, bringing the viewers' attention to the painting as a reality of its own. The scale of the works also directly impact viewers, enhancing the aesthetic properties of each painting. These works are Naito's experiments with form and material—they do not suggest any conceptual meaning outside of their physical properties.



RN1134-66 (1966)

Signed & dated on verso

Acrylic on canvas

34 x 34 in

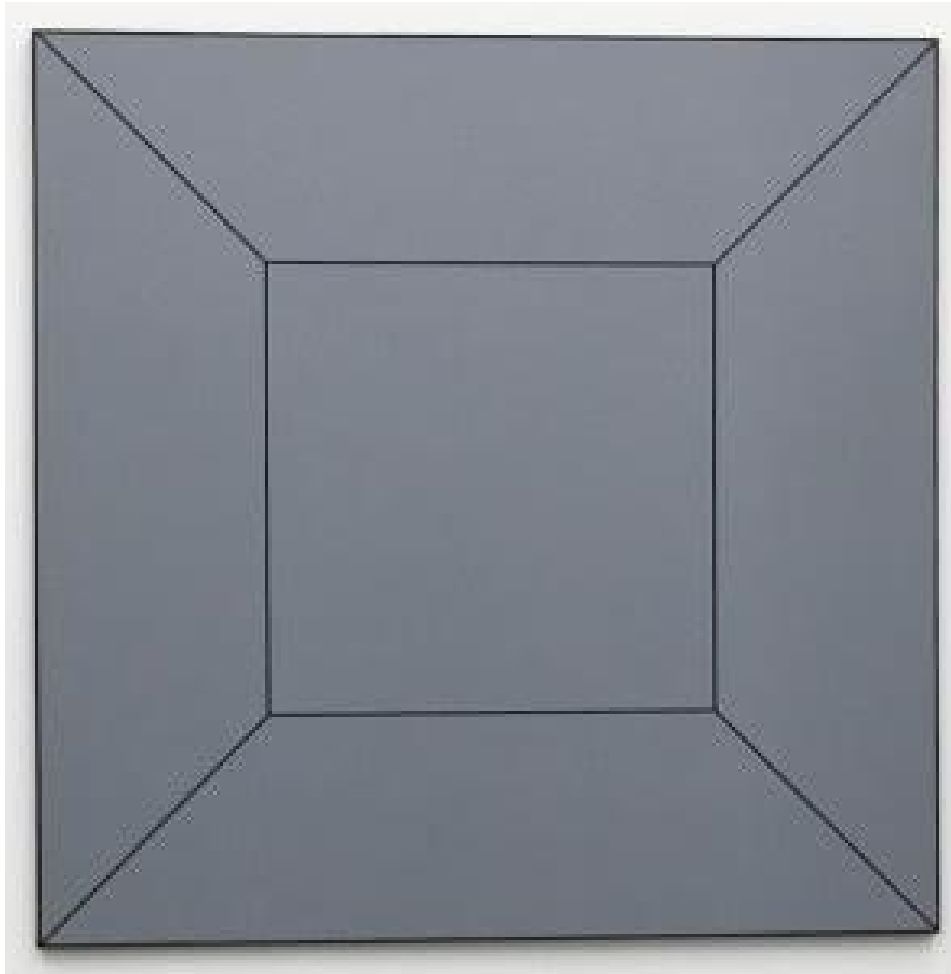
86.4 x 86.4 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

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RN168-66 (1966)

Signed & dated on verso

Acrylic on canvas

68 x 68 in

172.7 x 172.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

By the end of the 1950s, acrylic paint began to be widely used by artists in New York. Naito pointed out that it was artist Sam Francis who first suggested the use of acrylic paint to her, a truly American material, allowing her to venture into techniques that offered the artist less strictures. The artist went one step forward in her exploration of new available materials, creating a series of stunning monochromes.

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***Shadow, RN2418-91* (1991)**

Signed on front and on verso

Unique photo collage with oil tint

18 x 18 in

45.7 x 45.7 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

The exquisite black and white photo-collage *Shadow* resembles an organic tapestry in which the dark and light parts of the composition seem to relinquish the retinal movement in Naito's works from the 1960s as an in-depth exploration of the haptic. This particular work marks a shift towards Naito's "paper reliefs" series in which the artist fully cultivated the various formal characteristics of her later work: an abandonment of color, the development of organic patterns contained within a square structure, and the poetic exploration of tactile possibilities on a flat surface.



RN10-99 (1999)

Signed & dated certificate

Wire cube with rolled paper

8 x 8 x 8 in

20.3 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

By the end of the 1990s, Rakuko Naito began a series of wire cubes, inserted different layers of structures and elements to be enveloped within a structure. These small-size wire “cages” are primarily displayed on tables and shelves, or suspended from the ceiling via nylon threads. In these works, Naito delves into the delicate effects of light and transparency on a three-dimensional object through a manufactured spurious material. Although the artist’s cages are made of an industrially produced mesh, the rolled paper displayed in *RN-cube0-99* includes an organic element that can be linked to works created by Eva Hesse and Gego in the 1960s. More importantly, *RN-cube0-99* creates a striking visual paradox—fitting a delicate piece of Japanese paper into a rigid structure, the artist unpacks a traditional element to bring a poetic local resonance to the literalist logic of minimalism.



RNcube3-02 (2002)

Signed & dated certificate

Wire cube

8 x 8 x 8 in

20.3 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

By the end of the 1990s, Rakuko Naito began a series of wire cubes, inserted different layers of structures and elements to be enveloped within a structure. These small-size wire “cages” are primarily displayed on tables and shelves, or suspended from the ceiling via nylon threads. In these works, Naito delves into the delicate effects of light and transparency on a three-dimensional object through a manufactured spurious material.



RN2512-4-1/2-05 (2005)

Signed & dated on verso

Indian cotton ball with wax

12 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 4 1/2 in

31.8 x 31.8 x 11.4 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

Over the past twenty years, Rakuko Naito has devoted herself to the creation of a series of square-shaped compositions made of raw *kozo washi* paper that she cuts, scraps, folds, burns or rolls inside a box. Despite these “paper reliefs” seeming clear and precise in their execution, Naito constantly adds a subtle element of disarray to her patterns, bringing commotion and imprecision to otherwise systematically serial compositions. The intimate scale of these “paper reliefs” also operate in tandem with Naito’s refusal to incorporate color. These works demand a different kind of attention, one which focuses on their haptic qualities rather than physical presence or compliance to illusionism. Naito’s patterns at times resemble the natural world, reproducing sequences of organic repetitions and circular forms; her other configurations display geometric designs with subtle alterations in their systemic arrangement. The artist’s three-dimensional objects fit neither into the category of painting nor sculpture, assembling a laborious hand-made process in which she reconciles opposed forces such as tradition, contemporaneity, and modernity.



RN710-1/4-1-1/2-21 (2021)

Signed & dated on verso

Japanese paper with burnt edge stripe

10 1/4 x 10 1/4 in

26 x 26 cm

PROVENANCE

Artist

Over the past twenty years, Rakuko Naito has devoted herself to the creation of a series of square-shaped compositions made of raw *kozo washi* paper that she cuts, scraps, folds, burns or rolls inside a box. Despite these “paper reliefs” seeming clear and precise in their execution, Naito constantly adds a subtle element of disarray to her patterns, bringing commotion and imprecision to otherwise systematically serial compositions. The intimate scale of these “paper reliefs” also operate in tandem with Naito’s refusal to incorporate color. These works demand a different kind of attention, one which focuses on their haptic qualities rather than physical presence or compliance to illusionism. Naito’s patterns at times resemble the natural world, reproducing sequences of organic repetitions and circular forms; her other configurations display geometric designs with subtle alterations in their systemic arrangement. The artist’s three-dimensional objects fit neither into the category of painting nor sculpture, assembling a laborious hand-made process in which she reconciles opposed forces such as tradition, contemporaneity, and modernity.

Biography

Rakuko Naito, born in Tokyo, Japan, graduated from the Tokyo National University of Art in 1958, where she majored in traditional Japanese nihonga painting, an artform utilizing traditional Japanese materials. Following graduation, she moved to New York with her artist husband, Tadaaki Kuwayama and briefly attended the Art Students League in search of a less conventional method of working. During the early to mid-1960s, she made optical art and experimented with spray paint, masking tape and acrylic paint, a relatively new art material of the time which the American abstract painter, Sam Francis, introduced to her. Naito created works that emphasized flatness and downplayed the artist's hand. By the mid-1960s when Optical (Op) art became popular with artists, Naito continued her experimental practices leading her to simple forms, flat monochromatic colors, and simple lines. This approach continues to inform her practice today.

Naito has experimented with integrating such materials as sand, nails, and wire into geometric, colorless works to explore texture and materiality. Naito's work is characterized by a focused repetition of actions, decisions, and manipulation of forms, eschewing narrative. Her interest in geometry has continued into her works with paper: reflecting her interest in the natural forms and textures of the material that creates a reality which she views as transcending the limits of painting and drawing. For the past three decades, Naito has dedicated her artistic work to research into the malleability and strength of *kozo* and *mino washi*, traditional Japanese papers. The fibers that make up these types of papers are very strong, and their use can be traced back to the Nara period in 8th century Japan. Naito harmonizes traditional materials with a highly tactile and modern approach to sculpture. The artist's meticulous hand is in evidence in every piece of folded, torn, burnt, and applied piece of paper, culminating in the stunning work. As a result of her methodology, Naito's work reaches somewhere between our notion of "drawing" and "sculpture." With an innate preference for order and structure, Naito joins a circle of artists such as Mel Bochner, Eve Hesse and Sol LeWitt.

Rakuko Naito lives and works in New York.

Exhibitions

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

2021 *Rakuko Naito*, Shoshana Wayne, Los Angeles, CA, USA
2020 *Kuwayama Naito*, Christie's NYC, New York, NY, USA
2019 Adrian Rosenfeld, San Francisco, CA. USA. (with Tadaaki Kuwayama)
2019 Whitestone Gallery, Taipei, Taiwan
2018 Borzo Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland. (with Tadaaki Kuwayama)
2018 Hill Gallery, Birmingham, MI. USA. (with Tadaaki Kuwayama)
2017 Tayloe Piggott Gallery, "Tearing Rolling Folding," Jackson, WY. USA.
2017 Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York City, NY. USA. (with Tadaaki Kuwayama)
2016 Karuizawa New Art Museum. Karuizawa, Japan.
2016 Whitestone Gallery, Tokyo, Japan.
2013 Weber Fine Art. Greenwich, CT
2012 Tayloe Piggott Gallery, "Nature Constructed," Jackson, WY. USA. (curated by Michael Klein)
2009 Noma Gallery, "Thoughts in Circles & Squares," San Francisco, CA. USA.
2009 Maiden Lane Exhibition Space, "Permutation-Variant-Structure," New York City, NY. USA. (curated by Elisabeth Akkerman)
2007 Galerie Renate Bender, Munich, Germany.
2004 Denise Cade Gallery, "Art Paris," Paris, France.
2003 Tamada Project, Tokyo, Japan.
2003 Galerie Renate Bender, Munich, Germany.
2001 Denise Cade Gallery, "Works of and with, but not on, Paper" New York City, NY. USA.
1992 Sakura Gallery, Nagoya, Japan.
1982 Gimpel+Hanover & Andre Emmerich Galerien, Zurich, Germany.
1981 Akira Ikeda Gallery, Nagoya, Japan. 1978 Charleston Art Museum of Sunrise, West Virginia.
1972 Henri Gallery, Washington D.C., USA
1965 North Truro Art Gallery, Massachusetts, USA.
1965 World House Gallery, New York City, NY. USA.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

2019 Mies-Van-der-Rohe Haus, "White Box," Berlin, Germany. 2018 Adelson Galleries, "Repsychling" Boston, MA. USA.
2018 Barbara Mathes Gallery, "Master Drawings: Post-War & Contemporary" New York City, NY. USA.
2017 Barbara Mathes Gallery, "Gallery selection," New York City, NY. USA.
2017 David Richard Gallery, "Sizzle and Chill: Rakuko Naito and Tadaaki Kuwayama Paintings from the 1960s." Santa Fe, New Mexico.
2017 Whitestone Gallery, "I love Taiwan" (Grand Opening), Taipei, Taiwan.
2017 Blum & Poe Gallery, "Systemic Paper" Tokyo. Japan (with Kwon Young-Woo & Dorothea Rockburne)

2017 Barbara Mathes Gallery, "Tadaaki Kuwayama / Rakuko Naito," New York City, NY. USA

2016 Galerie Renate Bender, "Kinder, wie die Zeit vergeht!," Munich, Germany.

2015 Galerie Renate Bender, "Work On & With Paper," Munich, Germany

2015 Hill Gallery, "Some Assemble Required," Birmingham, MI. USA.

2015 David Richard Gallery. "OP Infinitum: American Op Art in the 60's," Santa Fe, NM. USA.

2015 Macy Gallery, "Repsychling," Columbia University, New York City, NY. USA.

2015 Ressle/Chun at Waterfall Mansion. New York City, NY. USA.

2015 Barbara Mathes Gallery, "Master Drawings New York," New York City, NY. USA.

2014 Museo D'arte Contemporanea. "Prossimamente: Global Exchange Astrazione Geometrica del 1950," Rome, Italy.

2013 Hill Gallery. Birmingham, MI. USA.

2013 Tayloe Piggott Gallery, "Inter Weaving," Jackson, WY. USA.

2013 Gebert Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM. USA.

2013 Galerie Renate Bender, "Papierwelten II," Munich, Germany

2012 QuadrART, "Paper and More" Dornbirn, Austria. (curated by Renate Bender)

2011 The Sylvia Wald & Po Kim Art Gallery, "Breathing," New York City, NY. USA. (curated by Soojung Hyun)

2010 David Richard Gallery, "1960s Revisited," Santa Fe, NM. USA.

2010 Madron Gallery, "The Responsive Mind," Chicago, IL. USA.

2009 International Women Artists' Biennale, Incheon, Korea.

2008-9 Bjorn Ressle Gallery, "The Winter Salon – Works on Paper" New York City, NY. USA.

2008 Gary Snyder Project Space, "New American Abstraction 1960-'75," New York City, NY. USA.

2007 Pratt Institute Gallery, "Optical Edge" New York City, NY. USA. (curated by Robert C. Morgan)

2007 Columbus Museum of Art, "Optic Nerve: Perceptual Art of the 1960s," Columbus, OH. USA. (curated by Joe Houston)

2007 Galerie Renate Bender, "Papierwelten," Munich, Germany.

2006 2X13 Gallery, "Honest Echo," New York City, NY. USA. (curated by J. Grace Rim)

2005 Tenri Foundation, "Horsefeathers Etc.." New York City, NY. USA. (curated by Thalia Vrachopoulos)

2005 Neuen Kunstvereins, "Papier=Kunst 5," Aschaffenburg, Germany.

2005 The Lab Gallery at Roger Smith, "Neutral," New York City, NY. USA. (curated by Robert C. Morgan)

2004 Museo Nacional Centre De Arte Reina Sofia, "Monocromos, Variaciones Sobre El Tema," Madrid, Spain. (curated by Barbara Rose)

2004 The Gibson Gallery at SUNY Potsdam, "Resounding Spirit," Potsdam, NY. USA.

2002 Chelsea Art Museum, "Samadhi," New York City, NY. USA. (curated by Robert C. Morgan)

2002 Denise Cade Gallery, "20 Years Anniversary Show," New York City, NY. USA.

2000 Salena Gallery at Long Island University, "Perceptions: Solitude Shared," New York City, NY. USA.

1999 Galerie Renate Bender, Munich, Germany.

1994 Sakura Gallery. Nagoya, Japan.

1993 Bergen Museum, "A Moment Becomes Eternity," Hackensack, NJ. USA. (curated by Michael Walls)

1987 Olympia & York, Park Ave Atrium, "In the Natural World," New York City, NY. USA.
1984 Robert Brown Contemporary Art, Washington D.C., USA
1980 Heritage Plantation, "An American Flower Show," Sandwich, MA. USA. (curated by J. Frederic Cain)
1979 Nancy Roth Gallery, Katonah, NY. USA.
1974 Tokyo International Biennale, Tokyo, Japan.
1966 Wadsworth Athenaeum, "Black & White," Hartford, CT. USA.
1965 Tokyo Gallery, "Five Painters," Tokyo, Japan.
1964 The Contemporary Art Center, "Mortion & Movement," Cincinnati, OH. USA.
1964 Purdue University, Lafayette, IN. USA.
1964 The Larry Aldrich Museum, "Old Hundred" (Opening Exhibition), Ridgefield, CT. USA.
1964 Southampton Art Gallery East, New York City, NY. USA.
1962 Jerald Morris International Gallery, Toronto, Canada.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS:

The Larry Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT, USA. Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, FL. USA.
Kemper Art Collection, Chicago, IL. USA. Roland Gibson Art Foundation, SUNY Potsdam, Potsdam, NY.
USA. Wellesley College Davis Museum, Wellesley, MA. USA. Museo de Arte Contemporaneo, Buenos Aires.
Argentina. Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, CT. USA. Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers
University, New Brunswick, NJ. USA. Voorlinden Museum, Wassenaar, Netherlands. Sammlung Brühel,
Cologne, Germany. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA. USA. Francis Greenburger
Collection, New York City, USA.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE:

2003 Invitation by The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, CT. USA.

Courtesy of Rakuko Naito and Alison Bradley Projects

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