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Tadaaki Kuwayama, *New York*, 2014. Photo: Rakuko Naito/Alison Bradley Projects.

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TADAAKI KUWAYAMA (1932–2023)

Japanese Minimalist Tadaaki Kuwayama, known for his metallic monochrome works that at once evoke the racket of industry and the enduring calm of eternity, has died. Kuwayama was ninety-one years old. News of his death was announced by Alison Bradley Projects, which represents the artist. Like many Japanese of his generation, Kuwayama moved to the United States in the late 1950s. Arriving in the twilight of Abstract Expressionism and at the dawn of Pop and Minimalism, and amid a cohort of amid friends and contemporaries including Dan Flavin, Sam Francis,

Donald Judd, Kenzō Okada, and Frank Stella, he quickly carved out a reputation for himself with a body of work that, as Ronny Cohen wrote in a 1989 issue of *Artforum*, “calls attention to matters of construction, to the repetition of actions, resulting in forms laden with mystery.”

Tadaaki Kuwayama was born in the industrial city of Nagoya, Japan, in 1932. Following his graduation from the Tokyo National University of Art, where he studied *nihonga*, or traditional Japanese painting, Kuwayama in 1958 moved to New York with his wife, artist Rakuko Naito. He initially enrolled in the Art Students League, but, he told the *New York Art Beat*'s Kosuke Fujitaka in 2012, “that wasn’t a very interesting place to be; it was where amateurs and bourgeois wives went, and the teachers were all conservative. So I hardly went to school at all. I would just sign in and go home.” Kuwayama instead became heavily involved in the city’s art scene and began a series of explorations that led to the discovery of his own unique style. This is most famously embodied by the monochrome canvas, divided into segments by narrow, sometimes crisscrossing metallic strips. In his *Untitled: Red and Blue* of 1961, which he showed that year at Richard Bellamy’s Green Gallery in New York, he wrapped a rectangular canvas with a type of paper typically used in *nihonga*, which he was trying desperately to move away from. Bisecting the work’s red top half and blue bottom half is a thin band of metallic silver leaf. “I’d never used oil paint before, so I didn’t know what techniques were involved,” he explained to Fujitaka. “And yet I couldn’t bear the type of painting I already knew.”

The following year, Kuwayama began investigating three-dimensionality, constructing his first freestanding floor-bound work from a four-by-eight-foot panel encrusted with Japanese paper and painted black. By 1965, he had largely abandoned paper and moved on to spray paint, which allowed him to create flat surfaces free of brushstrokes and with no evidence of their making. By this point, the majority of his works were square, and the silver leaf had been replaced by bands of aluminum or chrome, which might divide a work into quadrants, or into rectangular or triangular halves. In their frequently vibrant hues and glossy, varnished surfaces, the works referred to the materials common in the auto-manufacturing and aerospace industries, which dominated his hometown. At the same time, their unvariegated colors, measured segments, and repetitive forms evoked a sense of tranquility. “Kuwayama . . . manages to wring from [his] limited means a surprisingly personal statement,” wrote Barbara Rose in a 1967 issue of *Artforum*.

Kuwayama over the ensuing decades expanded his practice to include substrates such as Bakelite, Mylar, and titanium, which though they lent a hardness and a shine to his work, did not diminish its inchoate warmth. The artist continued to focus on pure hue and form, to the exclusion of all other concerns, including that regarding any perceived hierarchy of color, which might inform the order of a given set of works’ presentation. “I think colors should be treated as equivalent to each other,” he explained. “The point is that they just exist.”

Kuwayama’s work is held in the collections of major international institutions including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Indianapolis Museum of Art; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, both in New York; Stiftung für Konstruktive und Konkrete Kunst, Zurich; Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart; the Hiroshima City Museum of Art; the National Museum of Art, Osaka; the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; the Nagoya City Art Museum; the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the National Museum of Modern Art, all in Tokyo; and the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Chiba.

The sense of stillness and timelessness in his oeuvre sprang from his belief that his work should represent a sense of existence. “People don’t just live for the present; they live in the knowledge that there is a future ahead,” he told Fujitaka. “I think art should be the same.”

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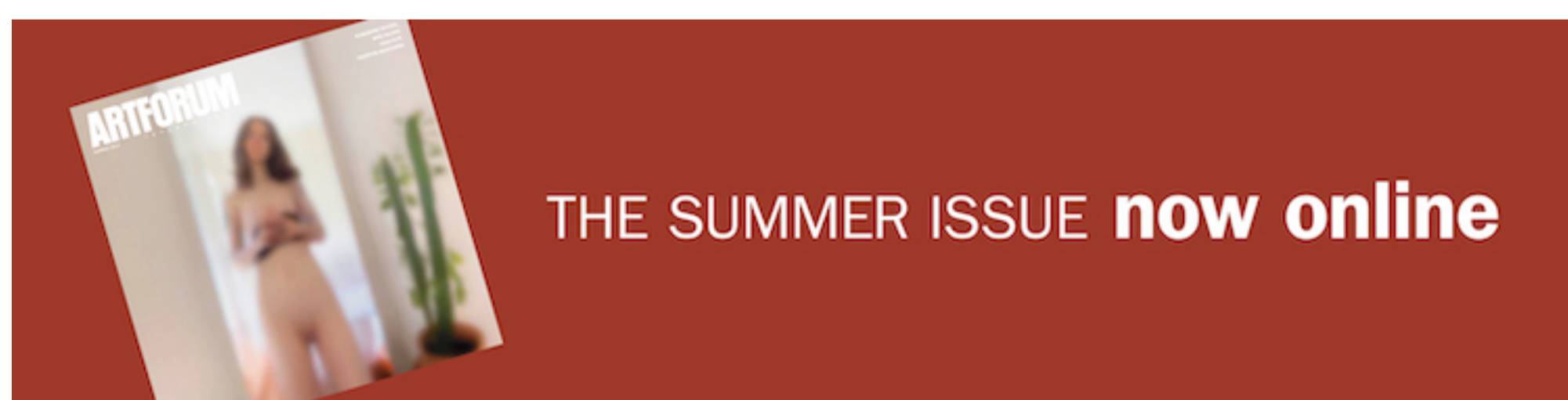
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