

Interview with Tadaaki Kuwayama

This interview was recorded at the studio of Tadaaki Kuwayama and Rakuko Naito, New York City, on 2 April 2018. It was undertaken as research for the exhibition *Minimalism: Space. Light. Object.*, held at National Gallery Singapore and the ArtScience Museum, Singapore, in 2018–2019, and an extract was published in the exhibition catalogue. The exhibition presented a global perspective on Minimal and Post-Minimal art, with a particular focus on the influence of Asian philosophies and the contributions of Asian artists. Tadaaki's work was pivotal to the exhibition, which featured two dry pigment works from 1960: a black panel, alongside other black paintings by Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman; and a cobalt blue panel, paired with a 1961 red infinity net by Yayoi Kusama. Together these works demonstrated Tadaaki's extraordinary innovation in monochrome painting, using Japanese *nihonga* pigments and paper to entirely new ends, as well as his significant presence in New York at the time, as this interview demonstrates. His is a profound legacy that has only just begun to be properly recognised.

Russell Storer

Russell Storer: Can you tell me about your early studies in Japan?

Tadaaki Kuwayama: I went to Tokyo University of the Arts. I didn't know *nihonga* [Japanese-style painting], materials or anything at the time. Once I got in, I learned about the materials, and found that the professor was very conservative and was part of a national historical painting group, and I don't like those. Actually, I didn't particularly like *nihonga*; as a student, I learned about art in France, but only during the weekends. They said if I were to have a show while I was still a student, they will kick me out. They said: "This is traditional Japanese painting"—but this is not right.

RS: It's quite neo-traditional, a kind of modern revival.

TK: Yeah, the world was changing...So we were against those [conservative] groups. And the painting too, was very classic. It did nothing for the young people at the time, and we didn't hear anything from the United States. I saw maybe Jackson Pollock's painting and Calder. I was so impressed with those two, that's about it. I thought at the time that the United States is the richest country after the war, and France is supposed to have won the war, but in reality it was nothing like that. I thought only rich countries support art and Japan has not that kind of situation.

[Rakuko] was two classes younger and we knew each other and decided to go to the United States. I waited until after she graduated, so I waited two years with nothing else to do but see movies or read books or see my friends. When she finally graduated we decided to come to the United States. The only way was with a student visa, there was no tourist visa or anything in those days. I had an interview with the head of the United States office and they said, "why are you going to the United States? You should go to Paris." I never heard that Paris was any good, and I explained that I'd rather go to the United States. Because of the people support, and as the richest country that can support art, and they said OK. So we came to the United States.

Nihonga, I never learned, but I know its materials: pigment and paper. I carried those materials to this country. I went to the Art Students League [of New York], and I saw that the students there were not interested in school either—school is boring! The school was on 57th Street, near the Museum [of Modern Art] on 53rd, and they had big shows in those days. I was so impressed by American art—huge! I had never seen artworks that big.

RS: So which works were these?

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TK: That was maybe '59, and I saw Barnett Newman's work, Sam Francis, Rothko—all these so impressed me. And I thought: these are great artists but I won't follow them; this work is already passé. We should make another generation of art. I was also painting myself. I had to go to school every day, do the morning assignment and go back home and do my own thing. When I made very simple shapes, that's when I felt I'm Japanese. We have old traditions, very simple and yet deep, like Zen, we have that thinking. And I thought I'm not influenced by that; I rather say that they were influenced by the Orient, that philosophy.

RS: The American artists?

TK: Yes, many were at the time. I never thought I was a Minimal artist, that came later. Maybe art critics gave it that name. I wanted to make pure art without history. That's what I wanted, and I still try to do it that way; my art has not changed much since those days. Later, people said this is Minimal art, but I never thought of that.

RS: Did you feel an affinity with artists around you, like Frank Stella and Donald Judd?

TK: Yes, and Dan Flavin. Because we showed at the same gallery, Green Gallery. Dick Bellamy the director wanted to make something new, and he was looking for artists at the time. I didn't know that the gallery existed. In those days, on Mondays, the museums and galleries were all closed, so young gallery owners like Dick Bellamy and the curators from MoMA, Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum like Henry Geldzahler [would visit artist studios]. Ivan Karp was the director of Leo Castelli gallery. He was the first one to come to my studio, and he liked my work. He said next week he'll bring over all those people. And I thought it's a joke—all those museum people coming to see a young artist! Actually they all came together.

RS: So from all the different museums...wow!

TK: Yes. Bellamy was there too, but I didn't know. When they came I just showed them, you say a kind of *nihonga*, but for me, it is purely art. When I showed those, they were so impressed. One young guy came back; that was the Green Gallery director, and he'd just opened the gallery on 57th Street in October or December with Mark di Suvero. He invited me to the gallery, so I went a couple of days later. Of course, I didn't know anything about the art gallery system, I'd never heard of that. They were nice, I looked at the gallery, and at Mark di Suvero's work. It was the first time I was invited to a gallery. So then I said goodbye. Bellamy misunderstood when I said goodbye, he thought I meant no more – but I simply meant goodbye! Ivan Karp called me and said, "don't say no". I didn't mean no! My English is not so good. So Dick invited me for the December group show in 1960. And since then I was an artist at Green Gallery. And then they asked me about a show in January [1961]. I didn't have enough time, but I did it.

In '61 or '62, I made the first [monochrome painting]. I think its colour was red, with a silver wooden ready-made frame. I didn't want to make a composition. Sometimes when artists paint red, they need a little yellow here, or maybe a blue there to make the composition. I didn't want that, so I did just one colour; this means no composition.

RS: What was your relationship with Frank Stella like?

TK: When I had my first show at the Green Gallery—in January '61, I had a small opening and nobody comes of course, and nobody knows who I am. Frank was showing his silver paintings at Leo Castelli's. I went there to see his work; I liked it. He's also kind of alone, going his own way, and he came to my show so many times. That's how we knew each other.

RS: Do you feel like you were trying to pursue a similar goal? He was trying to remove narrative as well.

TK: He was doing metallic, shaped canvases with the cheapest paint from the paint store.

RS: House paint.

TK: Later on most of them faded away! Judd was writing for art magazines and he was also many times at the gallery; we knew each other and he also supported me until he died.

RS: Can you talk about *Systemic Painting*? Did your inclusion in that exhibition feel like you were part of a new movement?

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TK: I didn't feel that way. Those young people, they just picked it [the artists]. I did a pink metallic and a blue metallic work. I used a spray gun; I started with the spray gun in those days because the material was straight for me, nothing to do with a brush.

RS: So it's really about removing the artist's hand. All your paintings from that time were sprayed?

TK: Yes, I started very early with the spray. People didn't like this kind of surface but it's okay!

RS: The aluminium dividing strips, how did you come up with that system?

TK: First I did two panels, multiple panels joined together. If the panels are in the same colour, then this is a joint line, right, not a drawn line, which means you cannot deny it. If you paint a line, this is already to me a composition.

RS: Were you looking at say, Barnett Newman, the zips?

TK: It was just a joining line, a physical line. Those much more expressed a feeling—this is one canvas, made with two joined canvases. The line is a joining line so I put in metal. At the beginning it was aluminium I bought in a Canal Street hardware store, and I put those in. And I'm still doing it!

RS: And then you have a very particular finish on your works as well to give a reflective surface.

TK: That's right. Most of the painting in those days, in the '60s especially, the Greenberg school, those paintings were big with raw canvas, which they stained with oil paint. I thought I'll do more what I want to strongly express, just acrylic medium that shines up, no touch, no nothing.

RS: And how did it feel to be a Japanese artist in New York at that time?

TK: At that time I didn't talk to anybody, I mean I'm alone...

RS: To other Japanese artists or to any artist?

TK: I think at that time not many [Japanese] artists came to the United States. That came later. I saw of course Kusama when she came to New York. She became attached to me. [*Rakuko: She didn't want to see any woman artists!*] Almost every day there was a phone call from her, saying "I want to go out." This was too much!

RS: Was she wanting to just have a conversation, or help?

TK: I don't know... She knows me, but I didn't have communication with a lot of artists. She of course, had the communication! But I liked her first show, the white one. It's still amazing and she's the best. I wrote a letter to my good friend in Japan: I saw good art in New York, that's Kusama!

TK: Lawrence Alloway was the curator for the *Systemic Painting* show and he came to my place. I don't know why; somebody told him [*Rakuko: Kasper König*]. Kasper König was so young... maybe twenty-two or three. He said the reason why he came to the United States was because he wanted to see Dick Bellamy and almost every day he came to the gallery to see Dick. I knew him also; he was also every week at my studio. Lawrence Alloway came to my studio with five or six girls, they were all Guggenheim curators or something. He liked my art and he picked already from that work for the *Systemic* show. He asked me my nationality. I said I'm Japanese and he said no, Guggenheim is only for American art. Those days every museum in this country was only American art. He said, sorry I cannot do it, but then he said, but I'm also English, I'm a foreigner. Let's do it! And then I was picked.

RS: Oh good!

TK: In those days, the Carnegie International was so important, and their special curator came to my studio, I think about '61. Usually each country included their sample, but that time he came to my studio and he picked my art. I had a group of international shows, and there was so much writing about my art. I did the Carnegie again in the '60s, they are supposed to never take the same artist twice, but the curator came to my place and really liked my work and asked me. The '60s were quite busy and so in the beginning I could earn from making art.

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RS: Did you feel there was an appreciation of what you were doing here? Do you think people could relate or understand?

TK: Some people, yes...but the majority was, "this is not art"!

RS: You also started making some sculptures. How did they relate to the paintings? What were you trying to do with sculpture?

TK: I showed at the Green Gallery in ['61]. First, Dick came to my studio, he picked this painting, this painting, this painting. Second, I learned the gallery was hanging my first show with a curator from MoMA. A young curator and Dick's friend. He came to the gallery, and they picked quite a number of artworks and they hung them together. I was just watching. In Japan, art hanging is just hanging, just doesn't matter. But here, two days to select, this one, this wall, that one is coming here, or this is less work or something. Two days they are doing it, I was watching, and I learned much from the hanging, so important. The second show was in '62 and that time I did it. Already I was doing those [works] and still later, Dick said you are doing those works for the '62 [show] already. In '61 I did it, and the show was early '62. I still have that work, a number of those. Always big, black, 4 x 8 plywood painted black and put the wood in a strip, paste on and paint all black. I don't know how many panels, the all-black ones. I learned in the early days.

RS: It is really evident in the more recent shows, just the precision.

TK: Now I always make it my own way, even museums. Space is more important, contrasting space to art.

RS: At that time how did you conceive of the space around the work? The relationship of your work to the space, how did you think about that?

TK: I don't know. I learned in the first show, they are hanging for two days. I learned much about art in that first show. I should make my own art show! I learned when I came to the United States, the first three years. I learned so much.

RS: During that time did you maintain a relationship with Japan?

TK: No.

RS: So you didn't go back or show there?

TK: No I couldn't. I set my mind here and a good friend, Sam Francis, was so nice to me. Before we moved here [current studio] in '76, he was around the corner. Sam Francis found me a studio with a skylight. He was so nice. Good friend.

RS: Looking back at that time from the perspective of now, what do you think is the impact of the work you did, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, the Minimalists. What do you think is the importance for you?

TK: They never thought of their own art as Minimal art or whatever, it was later that people say it. They just wanted simple, pure work, for the art I think. I liked those days, we were in the same gallery. Everything happened! Flavin told me he never sold anything in this country, nobody buys his fluorescent lights. Germans were supporting him. Judd too. Me too. I showed largely in Germany, this country was very hard.

RS: There was a bigger reception in Europe than there was here?

TK: Yes. My first [solo] museum show was in Folkwang [Essen]. That was in 70-something [1974]. The director was Dieter Honisch. He supported me. He was originally in Stuttgart [Württembergische Kunstverein], and he bought my work. Since then, when he moved, he bought my work for the museum. His last museum was the national museum in Berlin. They have some of my work. The Neue Nationalgalerie. He was so nice, but he passed away. I miss him.

In those early days, it was mainly from Germany supporting me. My first gallery was [Bruno] Bischofberger. Swiss. He called me when he was at the Stedelijk museum show [*New Shapes of Color*, 1966-67]. He went to the opening and he called me from there, and he said he would like to visit my place. And he came! He had just opened the gallery at that time, he was so young,

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just after graduating from college or something. He invited me there and said he would like to have all the rights for Europe. He paid me every month and that was the first time! So, the beginning was Bischofberger.

RS: That was a good way to start!

TK: The Stedelijk was my first museum show.

RS: That featured mostly American artists?

TK: Yes. Mostly American artists. I think the oldest one was Josef Albers, Barnett Newman. The 50th anniversary was last year. I went to Amsterdam for a gallery show [Willem Baars Projects, 2017]. The former director of the Stedelijk, Rudi Fuchs, was there when I was there, he was there every day and he really liked my work. Also another museum director, Benno Tempel, from Den Haag [Kunstmuseum]. He was there every day also. This was the 50-year anniversary show. And they say, why in 50 years you never show in Amsterdam? So I said, nobody ever asked me! So many newspapers wrote that up last year.

RS: You've followed the same principles, the same ideas throughout your whole practice.

TK: Yes.

RS: Are there changes you have registered? How do you see it developing from those very early works?

TK: Still I really like to do what I want.

RS: As you said earlier, your work isn't about anything, it is just about what you see. Has that changed, or do you feel that's possible?

TK: I don't know, of course it's possible, human is possible! I made a statement a long time ago, in '63, in *Art in America*. Still clearly that is my statement.

RS: When you said that 'art is only about itself'. That is still your principle.

TK: That is endless, it never stops. I use those same ideas. I'm not doing Minimalism, more like pure art.

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