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With a Little Help, an Artist Shows His Metal

By KIMBERLY CHOU

At 79, an age when most artists are preparing career retrospectives, Tadaaki Kuwayama is still experimenting with media. On Thursday, a new exhibition of four site-specific pieces in titanium, aluminum, Mylar and Bakelite will open at Gary Snyder Gallery in Chelsea.

This is Mr. Kuwayama's first time working in titanium, a metal that the minimalist artist, whose work is driven by color, form and material, said he has long been interested in. One of the floor installations in the Gary Snyder Gallery presents eight pink titanium panels, each one-foot tall and two-feet wide, positioned down the length of the gallery's main space like a kinked spine.

The pink of the panels is a chilly pastel hue produced when the titanium is placed in a tank with an electric current and "a little bit of acid" for 108 seconds.

"The color is amazing," the artist said recently as he showed off samples in his Chelsea home studio, which he shares with his artist wife, Rakuko Naito. "When I was in Japan, I visited one of the [titanium manufacturing] factories, and when they sent me samples I just played with those for years. With pure titanium you can make the color what you want—it's very sensitive for light, angle, distance."

Born in Japan, Mr. Kuwayama has lived in New York since 1958, for the majority of that time in the same Chelsea apartment where he and Ms. Naito currently live and work. He emerged as part of the defining minimalist wave of the 1960s with solo shows at the seminal Green Gallery in 1961 and 1962, and he was included in the Guggenheim's influential "Systemic Painting" exhibition in 1966.

Mr. Kuwayama initially worked with pigments that he blended himself (rows of brightly colored powders, stored in pickle and peanut-butter jars, still line his studio), then switched to spray metallic paint in the 1970s. He began producing his trademark minimal surfaces in Bakelite and then aluminum in the 1990s.

Five years ago, he decided to produce his sleek, geometric metal pieces in titanium. One immediate issue was the high cost. Another was finding the right manufacturing partner—for his metal works, Mr. Kuwayama hires factories—mostly in Japan, some in the U.S.—to execute his ideas. For one recent work, he scrapped an attempt in titanium and reverted to aluminum—and to the aluminum partners with whom he's worked for years—after the results weren't to his specification.

"[The factory] did bright green, and depending on distance and angle, the titanium would make a different color," Mr. Kuwayama said of the initial samples, with which he was pleased. "So sharp. A cold feeling—I really liked it."

But when he received subsequent maquettes, there were small scratches on the pieces, which the workers saw as a non-issue in terms of function. Not so the artist.

"They were horrible!" he said. "I asked them to correct it: 'I don't feel any art.' They said they're factory people; they don't know about art."



Artist Tadaaki Kuwayama with his new work at the Gary Snyder Gallery, where an exhibit of site-specific pieces will open on Thursday.

A creative process wherein the original idea is actualized by someone other than the artist is nothing new. But Mr. Snyder pointed to the uniqueness of Mr. Kuwayama's approach, as well as the need for a mutually appreciative relationship between the artist and the workers to achieve what is desired in a piece.

"One of the things I think Tadaaki is doing and asking for in this collaborative process, is that technology must be art for it to be something that he will move forward with," Mr. Snyder said. "A lot of the people from the factory came to Tadaaki's opening in Kanazawa [for his 2011 solo show at the 21st Century Museum of Art in Japan], and they were very proud to be associated. They weren't just workers in the back. It was really quite touching to meet the people and know how important everything was to them."

Mr. Kuwayama is also deeply involved with the spaces where his art is installed. Last week, the work table in his home studio was covered with drawings of the Gary Snyder space. To create optimal sightlines for the show, which will run through Feb. 25, he had a wall built down the center of the main space that covers two columns.

Those familiar with the artist's work will recognize his series of small, wall-mounted aluminum cubes, shown in this exhibition in red but previously made in blue, gold, silver and black. Mr. Kuwayama often recycles the physical components of work previously installed elsewhere. He will first create a number of units, then install the units in different permutations at different times.

"Those units will have a birthdate, but they take on another life when they're exhibited," Mr. Snyder said. "It will then have a specific identity in our specific space and will remain a work of art of that sort for the duration of the show. There's a type of flexibility or open-endedness for what these works could be."

The artist himself was characteristically frank when discussing why and when he makes art. "My ideas, when I'm hanging them, at that time they consist of art. When I take them down, they're material," Mr. Kuwayama said. "Many times I don't remember when I made [something], because I'm reusing always. For me this is my work—I can use it any time I want."