

KIKUO SAITO

Selected Press



Setting the Scene

THE JAPANESE-BORN AMERICAN ARTIST KIKUO SAITO DREW ON HIS THEATRICAL BACKGROUND, JAPANESE ART, AND COLOR FIELD TO CREATE A UNIQUE STYLE OF ABSTRACT PAINTING.

BY JOHN DORFMAN

KIKUO SAITO (1939–2016) had two *métiers*, as an abstract painter and as a creator of experimental theater performances. These co-existed in a state of fruitful tension for much of his life, representing two aspects of his being, the public and the private, the active and the reflective. These polarities can also be seen clearly in his paintings, which unite the contemplative coolness of Color Field with the energetic gestures of Abstract Expressionism. Establishing himself in the New York art world in the late '60s and early '70s, Saito bucked the Pop and Minimalist trends to chart his own course, moving back and forth between the theater and the studio.

When he left Japan for the U.S. in 1966, at the age of 27, Saito already had under his belt a considerable number of influences and skills. He had studied Japanese and Western art and had worked as a studio technician in the workshop of Sensei Itoh, who taught students traditional Western painting using classic academic methods such as drawing from plaster casts of sculpture. In return for this work, Saito received the right to use the studio space to practice his oil painting. He had also been exposed to the radical post-war Gutai art movement, founded in 1954 by Yoshihara Jiro and Shozo Shimamoto, and something of Gutai's intense physicality



and performative quality would later find expression in Saito's work, both painting and theater.

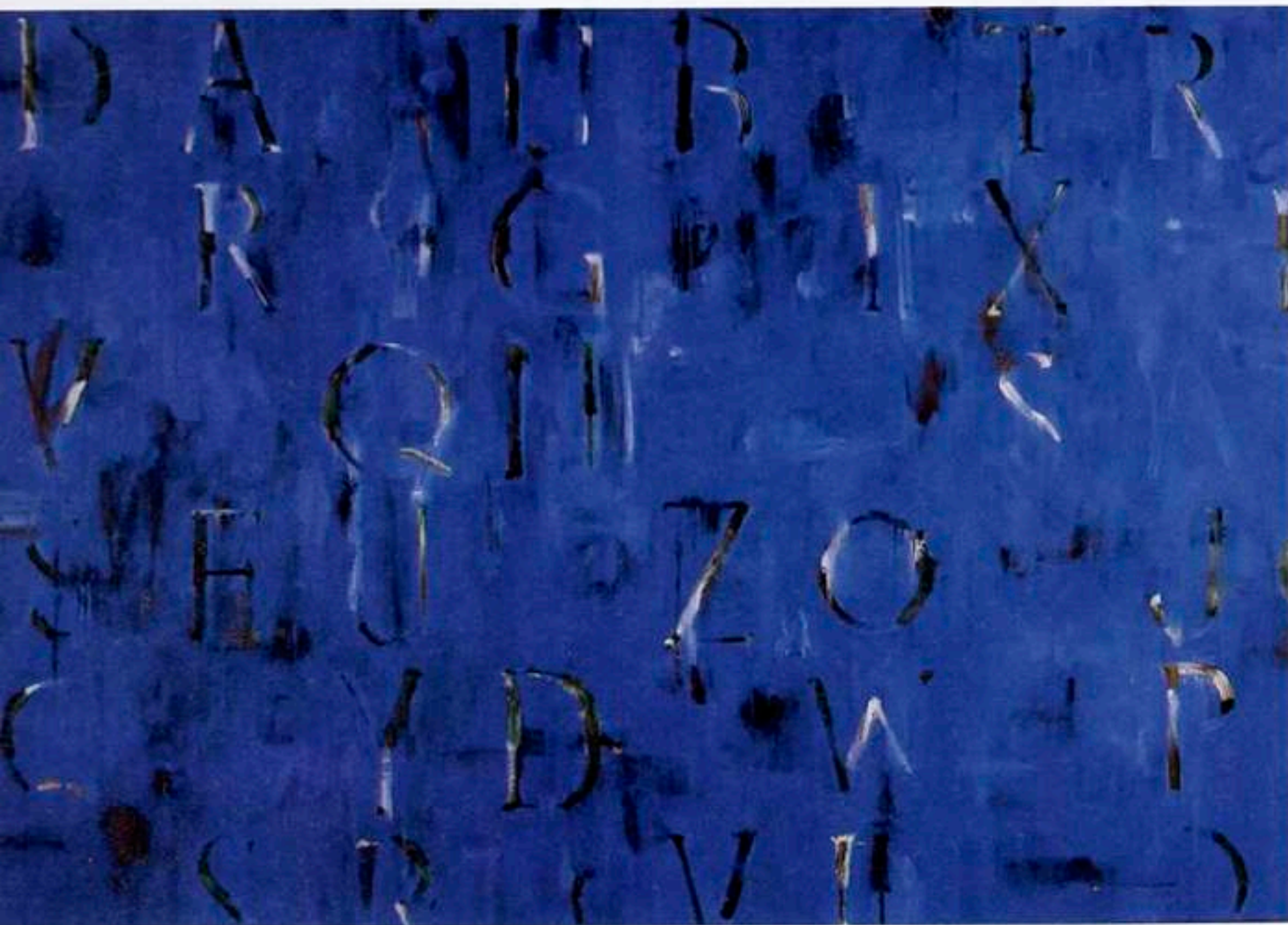
As for Western postwar art, Saito became acquainted with it largely through small, cheap books that reproduced well-known works of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting, Pop Art, and Minimalism in black and white, on newsprint stock. Thus, through a glass darkly, Saito glimpsed the New York art world, grasped its essentials, and aspired to be part of it. Most of his fellow art students in Japan who emigrated headed for Paris, perhaps expecting to find the Montparnasse of the prewar period still vibrant. But Saito, more attuned to contem-

porary realities, decided on New York.

His flight, however, terminated at San Francisco, and he had to take a Greyhound bus the rest of the way. During a stopover in Chicago, he went to the Art Institute, where he had a providential encounter, striking up a conversation (in his still very limited English) with none other than Ellen Stewart, the legendary founder of the La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club in Manhattan's East Village. Saito had done set design and lighting design for the Japanese avant-garde theater productions, and when he arrived in New York Stewart invited him to work with LaMaMa, with which he remained closely associated for many years. Inspired

This page, clockwise from top: Kikuo Saito, *Beggar's Moon*, 2009, oil on canvas, 44.5 x 102.25 in.; *Dime Lake*, oil on canvas, 2015, 56.5 x 78.25 in.; Kikuo Saito in his studio. Opposite: *Indian Gray*, 2006, oil on canvas, 58.75 x 80.25 in.

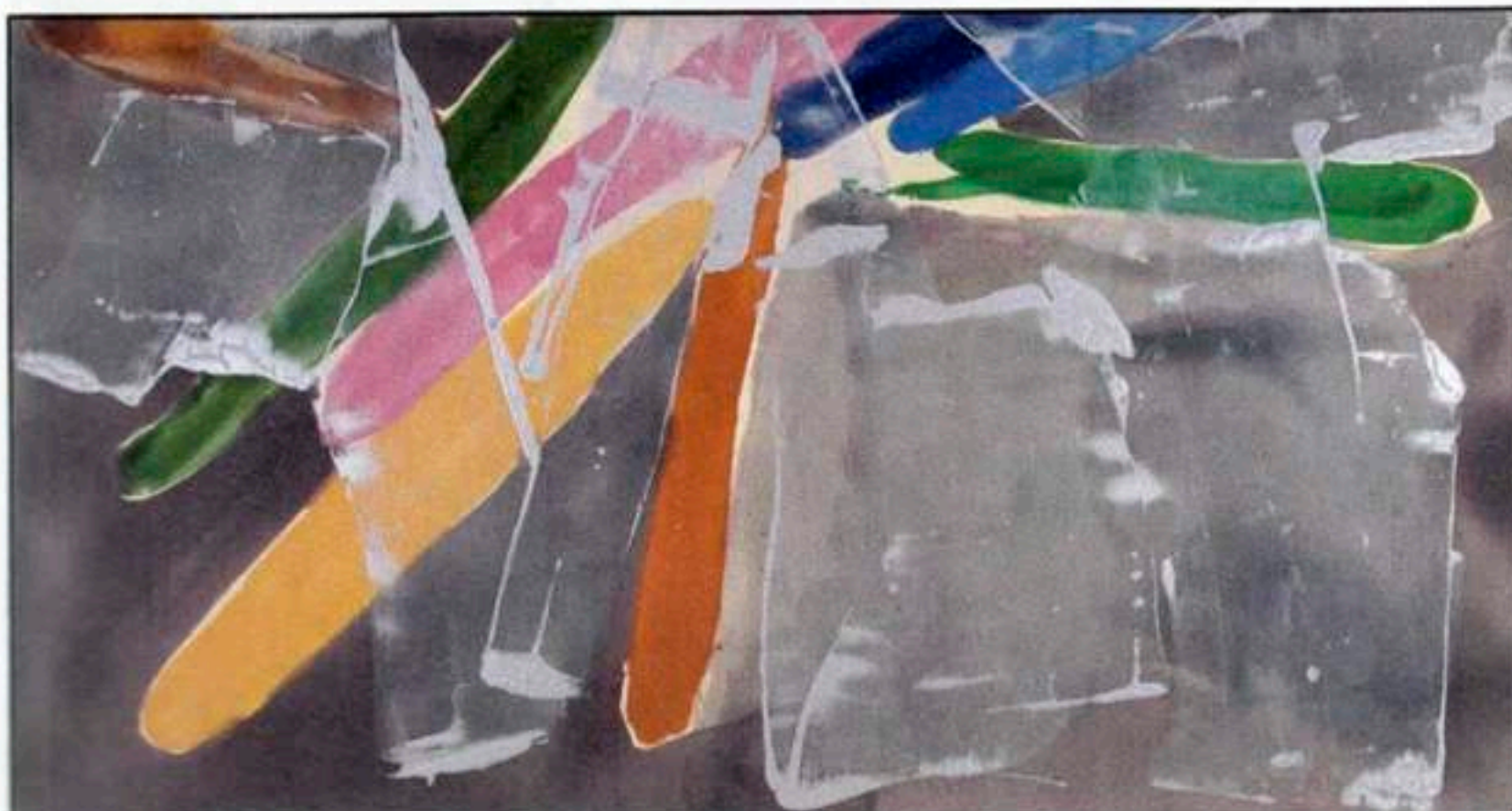




Clockwise from top left: *Blue Window*, 2001, oil on canvas, 57.5 x 83.25 in.; *Harbor Blue*, 2009, oil on canvas, 63.25 x 59.625 in.; *Purple Shadow*, 2014, oil on canvas, 67 x 57.5 in.; *Flannel Sky*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 47.25 x 87 in.

by Japanese theatrical traditions such as Kabuki and Noh, as well as the contemporary Butoh, Saito would go on to create unique sets, including his own abstract canvases as backdrops and unusual materials such as flowing water on stage. He worked with playwright and director Robert Wilson on projects in places as far-flung as Paris and Shiraz, Iran, and did the set design for Peter Brooks' *Conference of the Birds* in Paris. Saito was very interested in choreography as well as straight theater, and his first wife, Eva Maier (who died in 1997), was a choreographer and a frequent collaborator with her husband. Saito also worked with the great choreographer Jerome Robbins.

When he left Japan, Saito destroyed most of the oil paintings he had made there; New York was to be a fresh start. To earn a living he worked in a Japanese restaurant and took on carpentry jobs, but soon he got himself hired as a studio assistant to three major abstract artists, first Kenneth Noland and then Helen Frankenthaler and Larry Poons (who, like Saito, was born in Tokyo, albeit of American parents). From them he absorbed the lessons of Color Field painting, in which the dense, sometimes





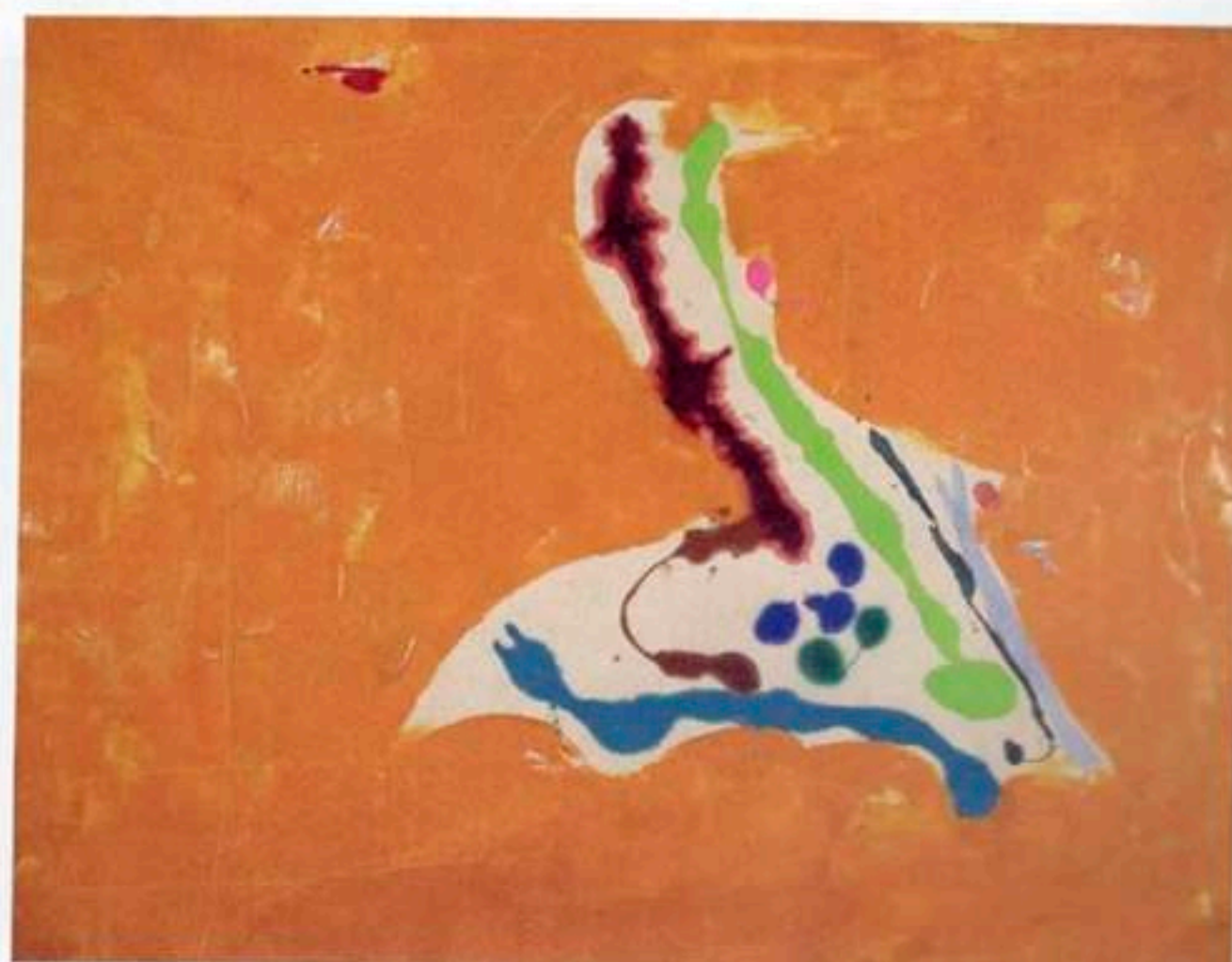
crabbed gestures of Ab-Ex give way to a serene, open style in which colors speak for themselves. Saito's early paintings, which he did not exhibit, were strongly influenced by Color Field.

Saito first showed his work in a group exhibition in 1970 and had his first solo show in 1976. His work from this period is mainly in acrylics, which he diluted and allowed to soak into the canvas. While this is standard operating procedure in Color Field, his paintings have a more dynamic feel than Color Field work generally does. In paintings such as *Flannel Sky* (1976), *North Wind* (1980) and *On the Snow*

(1980), color forms seem to flow into and around each other like water—perhaps like the running water that Saito deployed on the stage. His theater work also taught him to paint while the canvas lay horizontal on the floor—as was necessary with the very large backdrops for sets—as well as vertical on the easel, and his choreographic experience taught him to almost dance across the surface while painting, as well as to convey a dancing quality to the marks themselves.

In 1979, Saito quit the theater, tired of the complexities of the process and of the pressures of collaboration with numerous people. He sought the peace and self-

Clockwise from top left: *On the Snow*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 53.75 x 77.75 in.; *Untitled (223)*, 2001, oil and crayon on magazine paper, 12.875 x 9.9375 in.; *Island and Piano*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 68.25 x 79 in.; *Flannel Road*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 57 x 78 in.





Clockwise from top left: *Hunter's Roof*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 69.5 x 58.5 in.; *Blue Train*, 2010, oil on canvas, 63.25 x 59.625 in.; *Sanabria Rain*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 67.5 x 143.5 in.



of working that he is best known for today. Unlike with many artists, of Saito it can fairly be said that his late work is his best. It is characterized by large fields of color overlaid with dense, intricate lines suggesting calligraphy and, in the later versions,

sufficiency of the studio, and there he developed the mode

capital letters (in Roman type with serifs) that are sometimes legible, sometimes obscured almost to the vanishing point. In *Indian Gray* (2006), for example, the letters, such as Q, N, and P, stand out clearly, though they are isolated from each other and spell out no words. On the other hand, in *Beggar's Moon* (2009), one senses the letters' presence more than actually reading them. In *Blue Window*, a letter painting from 2001, one sees the letters as if through stained glass, and the rich hue was so beloved and frequently used by the artist that the Golden paint company, whose products he used exclusively, named it Saito Blue after his death.

The use of typography in modernist painting goes back to the Cubists and to Stuart Davis, and gained prominence again with the Pop artists, particularly Jasper Johns. Whether any of these was a direct influence on Saito is hard to say for sure; a likely explanation is a desire to express his own





youthful confusion on being confronted with English signage for the first time. And of course, calligraphy taken into the realm of abstraction, in which letters lose their literal meaning while retaining a deeper kind of meaning, is a staple of traditional Japanese aesthetics.

In 1996, after almost two decades away from the theater, Saito made a brief but significant return, collaborating with Eva Maier on a wordless drama titled *Toy Garden* for which he designed the sets, costumes, and narrative. Performed by students at Duke University, where Saito was an artist in residence, it was based on writings about Venice by John Ruskin and riffed on an imagined restoration of the lost left-hand panel of Renaissance painter Vittore Carpaccio's diptych *Two Venetian Ladies*. It was actually in *Toy Garden* that the capital-letter typography seen in so many of Saito's paintings from the 2000s first appeared. Another, similar theater piece of his from this period, *Ash Garden*, at New York's LaGuardia High School, was inspired by the volcanic destruction of Pompeii.

With Saito's death on February 15, 2016, the art world lost a beloved, modest, inspiring colleague, but his second wife, Mikiko Ino, is administering an arts institution dedicated to his legacy, called KinoSaito. The nonprofit is housed in the former St. Patrick's School, a century-old three-story brick building in Verplanck, N.Y., which Saito and Ino purchased in 2014 and which served as his last studio. It is expected to open to the public in 2020 and will feature exhibitions of Saito's work and other work relating to the Color Field tradition, artist-in-residence initiatives, and theater and dance performances. The interdisciplinary nature of KinoSaito will be a fitting memorial to the eclectic, boundary-negating multimedia work of this unique artist. 

Clockwise from top left: *Nickel Pond*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 70.25 x 70 in.; *Three Rivers*, 2013, oil on canvas, 60 x 43 in.; *Blue Wave*, oil on canvas, 2012, 73 x 72 in.



Kikuo Saito at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich



Kikuo Saito at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich, 2022. Photo: Wilfried Petzie

Often overlooked in canonical art historical discourses during his lifetime, Saito's work is rooted in the tradition of American Color Field Painting after Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, as well as Abstract Expressionism and Lyrical Abstraction. Significantly informed by his personal experience with experimental theater and his own inter and intracultural biography, Saito's gestural works reflect the dialogic relationship between painting and performance while exploring ways in which painting, similar to theater, can solidify action and emotion. Upon migrating to New York in 1966, the artist initially turned to the performative. At "La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club," he designed sets, costumes, lighting and props, and developed stage productions that combined the qualities of the Japanese avant-garde with his own reduced aesthetic. He later worked with noted theater directors Robert Wilson and Jerome Robbins on national and international productions. After several years of fruitful mutual influence between the two spheres, Saito devoted himself entirely to painting beginning in 1979. The graceful movements, concise forms and lighting qualities of stage productions had a lasting impact on Saito's painting practice.

Using various modes of paint application, some of which activated the entire body – such as pouring and dragging paint across the canvas—Saito eventually created works in which gestural brushstrokes, cryptic signs, letter shapes, fluid color shapes and gradients, coalesce into autobiographical abstractions that reflect the hybridity and complexity of the concept of personal identity. The alphabet paintings, for instance, fathom the formal qualities of the Latin alphabet on which the English language is based. In varying degrees of legibility, in sometimes stricter, sometimes more open grid structures, strikingly compositionally present and gently-isolated letters are placed on the canvas, whose placement does not follow any obvious logic of arrangement. Saito came to the U.S. with initially limited knowledge of English, so language was not simply read by the artist, but seen and transposed into painterly phenomena. The exhibition shows five works of different work cycles by the artist, honoring the complexity and versatility of his œuvre.

at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich
until November 5, 2022