



KIKUO SAITO

ARTnews



Kikuo Saito: Moon Tree, 1993.

KIKUO SAITO'S TANTALIZING ABSTRACTIONS SPEAK A LANGUAGE WE'LL NEVER UNDERSTAND

By Alex Greenberger

Scribbled numbers, wiped-away letters, word-like scrawls: all of these recur in Kikuo Saito's paintings of the early 1990s, a selection of which form a wonderfully mystifying solo show on view now at James Fuentes gallery in New York. The cryptic markings are cast against vast fields of color that, in the hands of an Abstract Expressionist like Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, might inspire transcendence. But Saito's color fields are thinly painted, purposefully left rough-hewn and off-kilter, and the illegible messages on their surfaces evoke something more like the intriguing thrill of communicating with a person channeling an alien tongue.

These canvases may in some way reflect Saito's own experience as an immigrant absorbing a new culture. He was born in 1939 in Tokyo and came to artistic maturity in the wake of the Gutai movement of postwar Japan. Lured by the Abstract Expressionist art pouring out of the US, he departed his homeland for New York in 1966, eventually working as an assistant to artists Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, and Larry Poons. His art has affinities with theirs—for works from other eras not included in the James Fuentes show, Saito created Poons-like torrents of brushstrokes and Frankenthaler-like blooms of color.

But the abstractions in this exhibition are more inscrutable—and tantalizing too. I thought I spotted the word “agony” in *Mock Orange* (1992) and considered whether the work's blazing hue was meant as an expression of turmoil. Then I realized that certain characters were blurred beyond recognition—I'd misread that word, and perhaps the painting altogether. Maybe the would-be text bore no relation at all to the fiery field behind it, or maybe it connected in ways I can never fully know.

Saito labeled these '90s works “Monochromes,” which is itself a clever linguistic sleight of hand, since the large canvases are covered with more than one color. The title of *Mock Orange* reads like a reference to the fact that this vermilion canvas actually contains smears of yellow. If some of his painterly peers found respite in pared-down abstraction—recall Ad Reinhardt's obsession with “purity” as the finest form of aes-

thetics—Saito was interested in intentionally muddying his expansive planes of color.

Can these paintings' mysteries be unraveled at all? Most works are titled in cryptic ways, but one seems to offer a means for understanding. *Moon Tree* (1993), a blackboard-scaled field of lush magenta, can be read as an allusion to tree seeds that were flown around the moon by Apollo 14 astronauts in 1971, then planted in sites around the US. The painting has no obvious relationship to those seeds, but Saito evokes a foray into outer space, a realm that remains only partially understood. A phrase that looks like “Amoxina inoi sn x20” also appears in the painting. Its meaning is elusive to me, but Saito might have intended it for other kinds of beings who can decipher it.

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**THE MOST ANTICIPATED ART SHOWS AND EXHIBITIONS
OF 2024**

By Maxine Wally

Kikuo Saito, 'Color Codes,' at James Fuentes Gallery

To celebrate the opening of James Fuentes Gallery's new space in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood, the Lower East Side hub for contemporary art is mounting an exhibition fitting of such a watershed moment. From March 8 through April 20, the gallery will host the largest presentation to date of the Japanese-American artist Kikuo Saito. Dubbed *Color Codes*, the show centers Saito's "Monochromatic" works—large-scale paintings he created during 1990-93 in his Tribeca studio (located just six blocks from the gallery's new home at 52 White Street). This isn't the first time James Fuentes has opened an exhibition featuring Saito's works; in 2021, the gallery organized a presentation of Saito's landmark pieces, all done in black. But this time, *Color Codes* focuses on a riot of bright and deep hues peppered with scribbled text and tacked-on lettering. Organized by former Whitney Museum and MoMA PS1 curator Christopher Y. Lew, the show epitomizes downtown art culture in New York City.



Kikuo Saito, *Copper Table*, 1993.
Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes Gallery



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JAMES FUENTES STAYING TRUE TO DOWNTOWN ROOTS AT NEW TRIBECA HEADQUARTERS

By Jillian Billard

After 17 years on the Lower East Side, the New York gallerist holds forth on his move to “the middle of the conversation”

James Fuentes Gallery, long a forward-looking presence in the contemporary art scene on New York’s Lower East Side, is the latest space to decamp to Tribeca. Rather than an act of trend-following, however, Fuentes’s decision to relocate his headquarters to the bustling gallery district represents the natural next step for a dealer who has been dedicated to championing the creative ferment of downtown artists for nearly two decades.

On 8 March, Fuentes inaugurated his new space at 52 White Street with *Color Codes* (until April 20), a solo exhibition of works by the late Japanese American artist Kikuo Saito (1939-2016). Curated by Christopher Y. Lew, it is the most extensive presentation to date of the artist’s *Monochromatic* series, made up of large-scale paintings executed between 1990 and 1993 at Saito’s first New York studio, located just six blocks away from the gallery’s latest address.

“I really see Tribeca as Kikuo’s neighbourhood,” Fuentes tells *The Art Newspaper*, adding that these paintings “were produced on Chambers Street, so it felt like a very fitting opportunity to present these works in situ.”

Building a history

The gallery’s move from its home of 14 years, at 55 Delancey Street, represents a significant milestone for Fuentes, whose upbringing was split between the Lower East Side and the Bronx. Since establishing his eponymous space in 2007, he has been widely recognised for spotlighting an eclectic group of artists with practices outside the commercial conventions of the contemporary art market, with a special interest in the evolving legacy of downtown New York. The programme encompasses emerging and late-career artists who have been historically overlooked, from the 35-year-old conceptualist Amalia Ulman to the 80-year-old painter and printmaker Elsa Rensaa.



Kikuo Saito, *Monk’s Pocket*, 1990

Fuentes's interest in curation was sparked as an undergraduate studying film-making and anthropology at Bard College in upstate New York from 1994 to 1998. There he was immersed in a community of artists and mentors and regularly frequented public lectures hosted by the school's Center for Curatorial Studies, then in its early stages of development.

"I kind of picked up this idea of curating as a profession through osmosis, studying adjacent to the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies and spending time in the library founded by Marieluise Hessel," Fuentes says. "The programme planted a seed."

Upon returning to New York City after graduation, Fuentes observed many of his peers struggling to get their bearings and find venues to show their work. In this he saw an opportunity to apply his foundational knowledge of curation to support the creative community around him.

"Right out of school, I had a very DIY mentality, and I was surrounded by all of these talented artists all of the time," he says. "That really motivated me, and is kind of how it all began."

Mentorship matters

Fuentes found an unexpected mentor early on in Jonas Mekas (1922-2019), the lauded experimental film-maker and co-founder of the Anthology Film Archives. Fuentes organised shows for Mekas around the globe on and off over a roughly 20-year period that began with a cold call to the artist in the late 1990s to pitch him on exhibiting in a 300 sq. ft storefront where Fuentes was also living at the time. Working with Mekas not only taught the budding gallerist how to present niche experimental works to contemporary art audiences but also informed his entire approach to the art world.

"Mekas was generous, inclusive and would always go out of his way to introduce people to one another," Fuentes says. "Observing the way he operated in his field was immensely informative for me."

After a few years of working with the seasoned gallerist Jeffrey Deitch and curating shows at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, Fuentes opened a gallery under his own name in a two-storey building on Saint James Place in Chinatown in 2007. He faced his first major crisis soon after, when the Great Recession pilloried the art market and threatened Fuentes with the imminent closure of his business only one year after its opening. Yet the dealer was undeterred, as evidenced by an answer he



Installation view of Kikuo Saito: Color Codes at James Fuentes Gallery

recalls giving in a New York Magazine story asking what he would do if he were unable to sell work in the coming months.

"Without even thinking about it, my reflex was to say that I would get another job to supplement financing the gallery," says Fuentes. As inspiration, he cites another mentor, the longtime New York dealer Mitchell Albus, who worked for decades as a public school teacher in Queens while programming his own namesake commercial gallery during his off hours. "That allowed him to have a salary and also advocate for art that maybe wasn't so obvious or easy to sell," he adds. (Albus retired from teaching in 2014 but continues to operate the gallery.)

Fuentes survived the recession and has gone on to thrive in the time since. After three years operating his original space, he set his sights on moving to a more central location. On the advice of the critic Roberta Smith, he upgraded to a new space at 55 Delancey Street, within walking distance of where he grew up on New York's Lower East Side, in

2010. His steady success there eventually led to a bi-coastal expansion; Fuentes debuted a Los Angeles gallery in the burgeoning Melrose Hill neighbourhood in May 2023.

‘Renovating’ and relocating

Fuentes considers his programme a form of “renovating art history” by bringing artists from the fringes to the forefront. For example, last September in LA, the gallery presented *Moving Through*, the first solo exhibition in the city by the American feminist painter Juanita McNeely (1936-2023). The show centred on autobiographical works originating in her experiences with cancer and abortion before the latter’s legalisation in the US. Fuentes’s representation of McNeely propelled her to a new level of prominence, with the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Rubell Museum in Washington, D.C. acquiring her work.

“I’m grateful for the fact that we’re in a moment now where society has shifted its priorities in terms of which artists are part of the dialogue, but there’s still so much work to be done,” Fuentes says.

Fitting neatly into this framework is his decision to inaugurate the Tribeca location with a solo exhibition by Saito. The presentation underscores Fuentes’s dedication to showcasing both innovative, largely under-the-radar works, especially by artists informed by downtown New York, and the historical narrative of his surroundings. He identifies “being in direct dialogue [with] the locality of the gallery” as key to his programme’s identity, adding of his space’s latest migration: “I’m excited about the shifting context because there are new narratives and new blind spots that we’re able to discover and bring forth.”

“For the first time ever in the history of the gallery, we’ll be centrally located and in the middle of the conversation,” he adds. “I feel like I owe it to the artists and the programme to be front and centre, and it seems like the appropriate time to do that.”

MOUSSE



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

KIKUO SAITO AT GALERIE RÜDIGER SCHÖTTLE, MUNICH

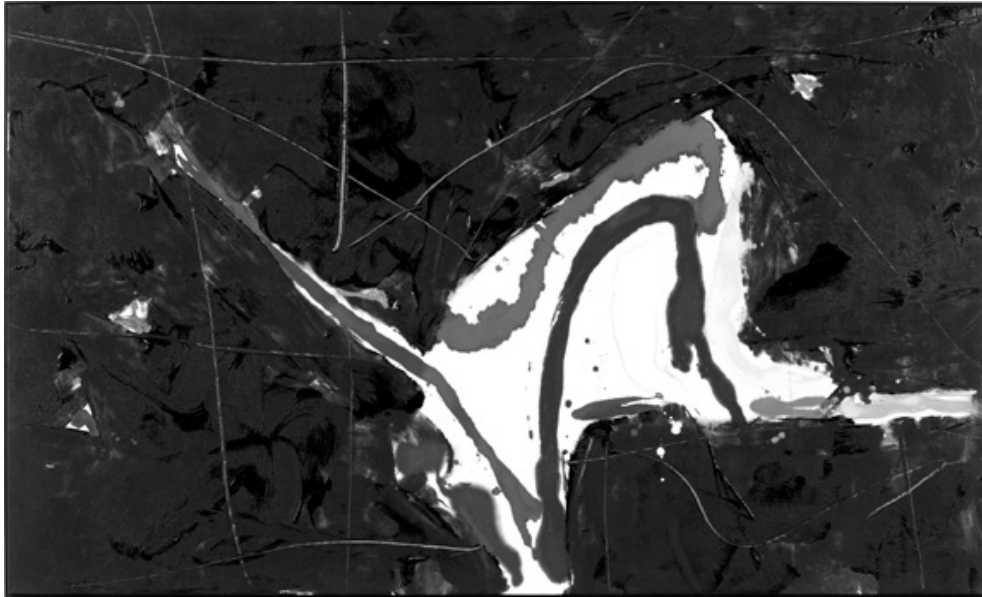
Often overlooked in canonical art historical discourses during his lifetime, Saito's work is rooted in the tradition of American Color Field Painting after Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, as well as Abstract Expressionism and Lyrical Abstraction. Significantly informed by his personal experience 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 re-

duced 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

James Fuentes Press



Untitled, 1980
Acrylic on canvas
48 × 80 inches

A NOTE ON KIKUO SAITO

By Hal Foster

At once wholly visual and utterly philosophical, the art of Kikuo Saito prompts essential questions about drawing and painting—and makes them almost impossible to answer. What counts as a gesture, and when does it become a sign? How does a figure come to be, and does it always produce a ground in turn? Can these roles be reversed, a figure become a ground, a ground become a figure, and can this reversal occur within the same work?

How does an image appear, and can it be made to disappear at the same time—or, better, coaxed to linger in a limbo between these two states? By what criteria do we designate an image as representational or abstract, and might a drawing or a painting claim a space between or beyond these two realms? What part does color play in all these tentative designations? (Sometimes Saito reduces his palette to black and white, but it is not really a reduction in his hands: his black can evoke a deep night, and his white can call up chalk lines on a wiped blackboard.) How is a symbol formed, and how might it be unformed? How is a language put together, and how might it be taken apart? Are these processes opposed to each other, as we usually think, or can they chase each other around a single sheet of paper or stretch of canvas? Saito makes these categories appear before our eyes, as if magically, and, just as magically, he makes them disappear, but never entirely so. At the same time, he lets us see the working of his magic—it is that labor that we behold—and yet this disclosure hardly dispels our wonder.

Talk of signifier, signified, and referent à la Saussure doesn't get us very far with Saito. Although he is deeply interested in language, it is not so clear what that language is. Gestures seem more important than words, numbers, or other symbols, but they all appear in his work, and sometimes they appear together, at once alike and unlike. More pertinent to Saito is the typology offered by Peirce—of an icon, which resembles its object; a symbol, which has an arbitrary relation to its referent; and an index, which bears a physical connection to its cause (like a footprint in wet sand). Or rather, this typology would be more pertinent but for the fact that Saito combines all three kinds of signs in his work, and so breaks up its tidy systematicity.



Irish Wind, 1980
Colored pencil and oil on canvas
87 × 58 inches

His invocations are paradoxical because what Saito invokes one moment withdraws the next. This happens on an art-historical plane too. For example, *Untitled* 1980 calls up Jackson Pollock, especially the blinding cutouts of his drip paintings, but only for a second, and then the allusion is gone. *Irish Wind* summons Cy Twombly, especially the scattering effects of his scribbled graffiti, but this reference also fades like a ghost almost before it speaks. The great grace of this art is that no strong subject — no proper name — is pronounced in its gestures and signs. Even though they are fixed for us to see, they also seem ephemeral, even precarious. And thus do they invite us to contemplate the persistent fleetingness of our own thoughts, visions and lives.


 ARTSY


Stipan Tadić, illustration of 52 White Street, 2024. Courtesy of James Fuentes Gallery.

JAMES FUENTES SET TO DEBUT NEW TRIBECA GALLERY SPACE

By Maxwell Rabb

Lower East Side gallery James Fuentes will inaugurate its new Tribeca space this Friday with a Kikuo Saito solo exhibition. The show, titled “Color Codes,” will run from March 8th to April 20th at the gallery’s new location at 52 White Street.

“I’m excited about, for the first time in my career, being in the center of everything, whereas we were always on the periphery,” founder James Fuentes said in a recent interview with Artsy.

This show will feature an extensive collection of the Japanese American artist’s monochromatic works, created between 1990 and 1993. These large-scale paintings were developed in Saito’s studio six blocks from the new gallery space, adding a layer of significance to her exhibition’s inauguration of the new location. Curated by Christopher Y. Lew, “Color Codes” builds upon the gallery’s previous Saito exhibition in 2021, which highlighted the artist’s use of the color black.

The venue itself has added historical significance, as it was the original site of the Collective for Living Cinema, an artist-run cooperative. The Collective, founded in 1973 and active for 19 years, was known as a vibrant New York film venue in its time. In collaboration with film curator Jacob Perlin, Fuentes is planning to restage the Collective’s original programming.

In May 2023, James Fuentes launched a Los Angeles location, which is currently presenting a solo exhibition of the late Geoffrey Holder. At Frieze Los Angeles last week, the gallery showed works from both Holder and Saito in a presentation selected as one of Artsy’s best booths at the fair.



KIKUO SAITO PROFILE IN ART & ANTIQUES

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 postwar 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 contemporary 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 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-sufficiency of the studio, and there he developed the mode 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, 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.