ARTFORUM

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Tetsumi Kudo

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

This tantalizing introduction to the work of Tetsumi Kudo, via twenty-five of his wildly idiosyncratic and often strenuously lurid multimedia sculptures, constituted the first gallery show in the United States devoted to the late Japanese artist. It was also intended to do some advance work for his major retrospective, which opened last month at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, by demonstrating that Kudo—little known beyond his native country and his adopted home of France, where he lived from the early 1960s until the late 1980s—was, as the Rosen show's essayist and curator Joshua Mack hails him, "a significant precursor to much at the core of contemporary aesthetics." The selection did confirm a range of motifs and concerns around interpenetrating states of physical and emotional turmoil that locate Kudo among the predecessors of contemporary abject expressionism, from Paul McCarthy (who recently included Kudo in a show detailing his own artistic influences) to Jake and Dinos Chapman to David Altmejd. But it also demonstrated intriguing departures from such straightforward historical vectors.

For Kudo—who grew up amid the destruction of World War II—"bodies" and their processes, whether conceived of as human or something more broadly terrestrial, were sites of damage and deformation and the loci of struggles for political, technological, and symbolic control. One of the first projects to garner the artist attention was a 1962 installation titled *Philosophy of Impotence*, the second of two so named, in which he filled a gallery at Tokyo's Metropolitan Museum of Art with an array of black, penis-shaped objects, partly as a response to America's continued military and cultural presence in postwar Japan.

Phalli appeared in force at Rosen as well, popping up everywhere in a gallery set as a cold garden of unearthly delights—these and other sculpted bits of human anatomy (which the artist referred to as "souvenirs") populated an array of flower beds, birdcages, and terrarium-like vitrines, often paired with unexpected found objects and arrangements of mutant flora. Kudo's phalli are restrained with chains atop a mound of dirt in *Human Bonsai—Freedom of Deformity—Deformity of Freedom*, 1979, while in *Cultivation of Nature and People Who are Looking at It*, 1971, they share space in a soil-filled plastic sphere with snail shells, giving the work the appearance of a grade-school biology project hijacked by Paul Thek. One also appears in the showstopping *Survival of the Avant-Garde*, 1985, as a human figure represented by a skull, a pair of hands, and silhouetting skeins of brightly colored string (think textile-arts version of Tom Friedman's self-portrait as exploded construction paper cadaver) reaches for his escaping manhood like a desert wanderer grasping at a glass of water. Taken together with the often blunt contents of the cage sculptures—especially in later pieces like *Portrait of an Artist in Crisis*, 1980–81, where hands daub a pile of feces with a gaily colored brush—the works suggest the psychological battles Kudo was fighting both without and increasingly within himself, feeling both his own identity and the larger social environment fraught with ruptures, atomized, losing integrity.

Tetsumi Kudo, *Tokyo-Paris axe magnétique et axe vide* (Tokyo-Paris Magnetic Axis and Empty Axis), 1982–83, mixed media, 15 x 26 x 14".

Given the dark psychosocial landscape of most of Kudo's work, it's all the more poignant that in the years before his death in 1990 at the age of fifty-five, he turned increasingly away from garish figurative elements and toward more contemplative works, many made of lengths of string coiled around geometric forms. These late works are at once the simplest and the richest on view, and include the tightly wrapped tower of multicolored thread *On the Structure of the Japanese System—The Black Hole*, 1982, and *That Which Appeared Vertically in the Opposite Direction of Will*, 1984, a column encased in string and crystalline clumps of glue topped with a calligraphy brush, all rising out of a Japanese lacquer dish: a kind of memorial to a life held together with the materials and methods of an artist, despite the odds.

—*Jeffrey Kastner*

John Altoon

MARY BOONE GALLERY

John Altoon's short career offers near-perfect fodder for art-historical mythmaking. It contains all the ingredients of a durable fable: a fiery personality (he fought mental illness, often trashing his own work and threatening to destroy that of others); right-time-right-place fortune (late 1950s Los Angeles, coming into its own as an art community); the esteem and affection of fellow travelers (among them Ed Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha, and others in the Ferus Gallery stable, of which he was a stalwart); and an early death at age forty-three in 1969 (due to a heart attack). True to parable form, redemption follows years of posthumous obscurity except among West Coast cognoscenti. A swell of scholarly and institutional attention to postwar LA over the past decade or so has renewed interest in many of the period's artists, including Altoon, who seems finally to be getting his critical due—a retrospective in San Diego in 1997 and two New York solo shows in three years, this one the most recent.

Two paintings and a pastel, all large scale and hung together in a side gallery, provided a glance at Altoon's early-'60s style, a vestigial Abstract Expressionism filtered through LA's cotton-candy palette by way of the Bay Area. *Untitled (Hyperion Series)*, 1963–64, features two quasi-organic masses, apparently on the verge of coupling and coalescing into form, hovering against an allover violet encrustation. The bulk of the exhibition, however, was work on paper. By the mid-'60s the artist was painting fewer canvases, producing instead scores of ink, watercolor, pastel, and graphite drawings on the big illustration boards he had used in a series of intermittent advertising jobs. Eighteen of these, executed between 1966 and 1968, filled the main space with a phantasmagoria of sexual dissipation and Rabelaisian humor.

Altoon was a masterful draftsman, and the number of works on view afforded a thorough reckoning of his restive, quivering line, used variously to streak, hatch, dash, dot, smudge, shade, and shadow. A few continue the abstract biomorphic lyricism of his earlier work,

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