

ARTIST'S PRESS



Aki Kuroda: Midnight Spaghetti at Richard Taittinger

By Anthony Haden-Guest

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It's not too often that I find myself at the show of an artist unknown to me, whose work I can relate to no "Ism", no movement, no current flurry in the culture, and which differs greatly in pictorial treatment from piece to piece, but which I consider coherent and compelling. Aki Kuroda is such an artist. He is Japanese, 78, and his show, *Midnight Spaghetti*, is up at the Richard Taittinger Gallery on 154 Ludlow Street. Kuroda went to Paris to study art in the '60s, and permanently moved there in 1970. In 1980 Marguerite Duras, a hugely respected French novelist and filmmaker, introduced him to Adrien Maeght, president of the Maeght Foundation, France's first foundation devoted to contemporary art. Maeght paid a visit to his studio, and promptly gave him a show. It was Adrien's daughter, Yoyo Maeght, who curated Kuroda's first show with Taittinger. This is the follow up. *Midnight Spaghetti* is also the title of several of the canvases that I saw on a first visit. It's a pure abstraction, vibrantly energetic, and, like much of the work here, it's black and white. Others feature an area of thickly pigmented expressionist brushwork or upon which globules of paint form a pattern on a cobalt blue background. The most persistent presences, however, were the canvases made with a graphic language, sometimes clearly referencing characters, such as Lewis Carroll's Alice, but most frequently a daffy, floppy-eared bunny, and the large black and white canvases, which is the fruit of twenty years in black and white. Upon a walk-around with the artist and the gallerist the following day, I observed that I liked the way Kuroda would sometimes paint in the title, not as Word art, just as an element of the painting. But why was it titled *Midnight Spaghetti*? Some chortling followed: "It is connected with what is going through his mind," Taittinger said. "It is connecting the brain to the hand. The spaghetti is all the ideas that are going through his mind."



AKI KURODA, COSMO GARDEN. COURTESY OF RICHARD TAITTINGER GALLERY.

Ideas such as the bunny rabbit. Bugs Bunny, Playboy Bunnies, Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit, bunnies have long been a folk/pop image world-wide, but nowhere more potently than in Japan, where folklore features a rabbit on the moon, and where the rabbit brings happiness. Normally when an artist uses such an image it will be to mine popular energy, as when Warhol channeled Marilyn and Jackie. But for Kuroda is it way more personal. "I remember fighting with my mother," he says. "I needed some comedy." "His mother was very harsh," Taittinger says. He indicated a canvas. "The mother is dragging the kid on the street. The kid is Aki. The rabbit is his childhood. And it is a connection to Japan." Does your rabbit have a name, I asked? "No," Kuroda said firmly. One canvas in the show features both a rabbit and a robot, which is another long-time Japanese icon, becoming a fixture here also. "This morning he told me I am turning into a robot artist," Taittinger put in. "The role of the artist is like mixing spaghetti together," Kuroda said. "Mixing information technology and this medium. In Japanese philosophy we see robots as light." So, what of the Alice paintings? Well, the Alice books are widely read in Japan, and it was, of course, a white rabbit that took Alice down the rabbithole and into what followed. "I am interested in the labyrinth," Kuroda said. "The maze". Why is this so important to you? "Because we have some labyrinths inside. I fell into the labyrinth as a child", he said. "Yes, it was black. When I was little, it was very dark. But there are many colors in the darkness."

This took Kuroda into the twenty years of black-and-whites, in the making of which he works with two surfaces, both of which are still wet, the white and the black. "In this process there are layers he can't control," Taittinger says. "And then the characters pop up after."

Do you see things in your paintings that you didn't knowingly put in? I asked. "Yes. Often. Most of the time" How much of a part does accident play? "For me it's very important. In fact, it's essential."



AKI KURODA, MIDNIGHT SPAGHETTI. COURTESY OF RICHARD TAITTINGER GALLERY.

Marguerite Duras had a question for the painter back during that meeting in the existential-lore-encrusted Café de Flore. Essentially, was the black that dominated his paintings just a color or a feeling? It's an obvious, but not-so-simple question you might ask, say, a painter who makes a lot of use of green, the color of growing plants, or blue, the color of the sea and the sky. You can get a sense of the answer Duras got from the title of her essay, *Les Tenebres de Aki Kuroda*. The key word translates as "darkness." WM