

Kikuo Saito

Recent Paintings and Works on Paper

ESSAY BY KAREN WILKIN

GALERIE THIELE

AUSTRIA

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GALERIE THIELE
Klosterstrasse 16
4020 Linz, Austria

Tel +43 (0)732 66 66 66
Fax +43 (0)732 66 66 66

www.galerie-thiele.at
info@galerie-thiele.at

Monday–Friday 10 to 12, 15 to 19, Saturday 10 to 16

www.kikuosaito.com

Kikuo Saito: Recent Paintings and Works on Paper

For some time, Kikuo Saito has been following two parallel paths in his paintings and paper works. One leads to a terrain inhabited by fluent calligraphy, bold gestures with the brush, and delicate traces of line—a population of unnamable, widely varied painting incidents that the artist disposes against expanses of luminous color like a director moving performers around a stage. Evocative of the natural world, with its associations of growth and change, these rich constellations of gesture are also plainly deliberate, as well as spontaneous—evidence of the work of a particular wrist and arm. While Saito’s sensitivity to the material qualities of paint makes it clear that his marks exist mainly as events on the surface of the canvas or paper, space in these works is often ambiguous. Shifts in the density, scale, chroma, and intensity of Saito’s urgent gatherings of strokes and scrawls suggest that each pictorial incident—however forthrightly inscribed—occupies an individual spatial position in relation to the others. In a typical picture of this type, whether on canvas or paper, a thick swirl of hot pink, apparently executed as rapidly as a signature—for example—can seem to break free of the ground as if to escape the attraction of an explosive, washy patch of pale yellow, while fragile strokes of dull blue seem to retreat from our sight.

Saito’s other path leads to pictures conceived as frontal “screens.” The literal two-dimensional surface of the canvas is asserted by rows of elegant, freely drawn Roman letters, arranged as if conditioned by a vanished grid. There’s a curious parallel with the way the American Cubist, Stuart Davis, referred to the role of lettering in his paintings of the 1950s, even though Saito’s unstable, loosely painted pictures are the diametric opposite of Davis’s syncopated assemblies of brightly colored, clean-edged, unbroken shapes. Describing what he called his “Alphabet Syntax”—his use of illegible scripts, letters, and signage as pictorial objects—Davis said, “Letters Lock Scale/Letters Lock Color/Letters as Front-Back.” Saito does not seem to have been particularly interested in Davis’s work, but in his paintings, as in Davis’s, letters play multiple roles. As in Davis’s work, letters in Saito’s pictures collapse

depth. But instead of becoming independent compositional elements, as they do in Davis's images, Saito's letters seem inseparable from the subtly modulated expanses on which they are inscribed. Yet they also measure off the dimensions of canvas, creating an internal sense of order, to the point of seeming to have determined the proportions of the painting. Occasionally, the variations of the weight of the line describing the letters and the small notes of color associated with them play against the declarative flatness and regular rhythms of the implicit grids, but for the most part, Saito's "alphabet pictures" read as minimally inflected, confrontational, entirely two-dimensional sheets of transparent color—like walls covered with judiciously placed, severe, and disciplined graffiti. If the "calligraphic gesture" paintings evoke the natural world, the "alphabet pictures" are explicitly about the man-made.

Both the "calligraphic gesture" pictures and the walls of Roman letters may have their origins in Saito's history. His repeated investigations of alphabets, scripts, and calligraphy—both readable and unreadable—may be a metaphor for his experience, as a very young man, of arriving in New York from Japan and being forced to deal not only with a new language, but also with new visual equivalents for that language. The two opposing motifs of freely disposed gesture and ordered lettering also owe a great deal to Saito's parallel practices as both a painter and a director of mysterious, poetic performance pieces. If the half-glimpsed, unintelligible, but somehow pregnant "handwriting" of earlier calligraphic paintings seemed to refer to Saito's fascination with the graphic manifestations of language, subsequent series appear to allude to other experience. The most apparently self-referential clusters of strokes in his recent "calligraphic gesture" paintings often have their origins in shorthand references to the characters in Saito's haunting performances, transformed and made independent by their new context. The screens of letters, similarly, derive from the set for one of his most poignant, lyrical efforts, an imaginary journey extrapolated from a Carpaccio painting. But whatever their genesis, both the lush, gestural drawing with the brush and the detached, disembodied letters take on new meanings when they are reassembled within the confines of the canvas; their significance, both conceptually and formally, seems to have only the most tan-

1. *Spanish Ladder*, 1998, Oil on canvas 35 x 68¼ inches



gential relationship to their associations with theater. Yet no matter how elusive or unidentifiable these various elements may be, they retain a sense of presence as compelling as that of performers on a stage.

The threads of both Saito's calligraphic and alphabet paintings have been combined, with remarkable effect, in his most recent works. These ravishing pictures are animated by the tension between the complex space implied by the exuberant brush marks and scrawls—which establish a multiplicity of locations within a vast, fluctuating visual universe—and the orderly letters—which make their unequivocally flat presence felt at irregular intervals. Counter-rhythms and new tensions are established by the fragments of color tossed back and forth between the lyrical swirls and neatly tailored letters. But since the range of hues that describes and enlivens both calligraphic elements and letters is, at once, like and unlike the floods of color that surround them, chroma further shifts space; letters fray and all but disappear, their delicate shapes subsumed by the physicality of engulfing swirls of color. The sumptuous calligraphic events and fragile drawing pull us into the fictive space of the canvas; the letters—even the most eroded vestiges of letters—hold us at bay by retaining their character as elements imposed on the surface.

The result is a group of powerful pictures that resist interpretation. They seem charged with meaning, yet their evident significance is not only wordless, but also difficult to describe. It's as if we were watching a deeply moving, unfamiliar play performed in a language we do not speak. The actors' words escape us, but the emotion rings true. Or perhaps a better analogy would be with one of Saito's own theater pieces, in which everything is suggested by visual means and movement, rather than by narration; multiple strands of oblique meaning unfold and then intertwine, while half-glimpsed allusions tug at the edge of our consciousness. Ambiguity reigns and yet we are elated and deeply moved, our emotions and intellects stirred—just as we are when we are confronted by Saito's enigmatic and beautiful new paintings.

Karen Wilkin, New York, April 2006

2. *Chinese Drum*, 2006, Oil on canvas 59 1/8 x 37½ inches



3. *Orange Mist*, 2006, Oil on canvas 43 x 69¼ inches



4. *Snow Bird*, 2003, Oil on canvas 39½ x 27 ¾ inches



5. *Renzo*, 2006, Oil on canvas 53½ x 42⅝ inches



6. *Winter Red*, 2004, Oil on canvas 60 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 42 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches



7. *Untitled*, 1997, Crayon & oil on paper 10 x 14 inches



8. *Untitled*, 1994, Crayon & oil on paper 10 x 14 inches



Kikuo Saito

BIOGRAPHY

1939

Born in Tokyo, Japan

1966

Moved to New York

Residency:

Duke University, January 1996

Grant: Foundation for Contemporary
Performance Arts, 1996

Visiting Professor: Musashino Art
University, Tokyo, Japan, January
2003

2005

Art Students League of New York,
Painting Instructor

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1976

Deitcher/O'Reilly Galleries, New York,
February 7–March 4.

Deitcher/O'Reilly Galleries, New York,
November 13–December 8

1977

William Edward O'Reilly, Inc., New York,
May 21–June 11

1978

William Edward O'Reilly, Inc., New York,
April 1–29

S.G. Mathews Gallery, San Antonio,
Texas, June 8–July 19

1979

S.G. Mathews Gallery, San Antonio,
Texas, May 8–June 19

William Edward O'Reilly, Inc., New York,
October 2–November 10

1980

S.G. Mathews Gallery, San Antonio,
Texas, June 12–July 12

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., New
York, November 6–29

1981

Galerie Ulysses, Vienna, Austria, January
27–February 28

Hett Gallery, Edmonton, June 6–20

Galerie Ninety-Nine, Bay Harbor Islands,
Florida, October 16–November 6

1982

Medicine Hat Museum, Alberta, Canada,
January 29–February 21

1983

Hett Gallery, Edmonton, Canada,
March 19–April 8

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
New York, December 1–31

1984

Il Punto Blu Gallery, Southampton,
New York, February 11–March 28

1985

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
New York, February 2–28

1986

Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton,
Florida, January 5–22

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
New York, April 2–26

1987

Galerie Don Stewart, Montreal, Canada,
May 13–30

Images Gallery, Toledo, Ohio, June 2–30

Eva Cohon Gallery, Chicago, November 7

–December 5

1988

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
New York, March 2–April 1

Waddington & Shiell Galleries, Toronto,
Canada, May 18–June 8

Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton,
Florida, November 11–December 3

1989

Galerie Don Stewart, Montreal, Canada,
April 8–26

Eva Cohon Gallery, Chicago,
April 28–June 1

Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London,
England, May 26–June 25

1991

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., New
York, January 5–31

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
Beverly Hills, California, February
12–March 16

1992

Gallery Three, Palm Beach, Florida,
January 3–February 7

Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton,
Florida, December 10

1993

Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London,
England, February 19–March 21

Blaffer-Robinson Gallery, Houston, Texas,
April 29–May 29

"Kikuo Saito: A True Colorist," Fort
Lauderdale Museum, Ft. Lauderdale,
Florida, August 7–October 7

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York,
June 10–July 3

Eva Cohon Gallery, Chicago, October
8–November 10

1994

Second Street Gallery, Charlottesville,
Virginia, November 4–December 24

1995

Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London,
England, September 15–October 21

1996

Duke University Museum of Art,
Durham, North Carolina, January
19–March 31

Marita Gilliam Gallery, Raleigh, North
Carolina, January 21–February 29

Galerie BMB, Amsterdam, Holland,
December 8–January 18.

1997

Galerie Thiele, Linz Austria, April 3–
April 30.

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York,
December 16–January 3

1998

Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton,
Florida, November 12–December 5

1999

Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham,
Michigan, February 6–28

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York,
July 7–August 28
2000

Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton,
Florida, May 4–May 27

2002

Stephen Haller Gallery, New York,
November 2–December 10

2004

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries New York,
June 30–July 31

2005

Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton,
Florida, October 13–November 5

2006

Gallery Thiele, Linz, Austria,
June 25–July 25

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1970

“Young American Painters,” Reese Palley
Gallery, New York

1972

“Contemporary Reflections,” Aldrich
Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut

“Four Painters,” LoGuidice Gallery, New
York

“Group Guest Show,” André Emmerich,
New York

“Group Invitation,” Musee Galerie, Paris

1973

“Group,” LoGuidice Gallery, New York

“Group,” Soho Center for the Visual Arts,
New York

1975 Invitational, Meadow Brook Art
Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester,
Michigan

1976

Group Show, Deitcher/O'Reilly Galleries,
New York

Group Show, Gray Gallery, New York
University, New York

1977

Group Show, United States Mission to
the United Nations, New York

1978

“Shape and Field,” Tibor de Nagy
Gallery, New York

1979

“Painting and Sculpture by Candidates
for Art Awards,” American Academy
and Institute for Arts and Letters, New
York

Group Show, Galerie Ninety-Nine, Bay
Harbour Islands, Florida

Group Show, Watson de Nagy Gallery,
Houston, Texas

1980

“ROSC International Exhibition,” Dublin,
Ireland

“Art 80,” Basel Art Fair, Basel,
Switzerland

“The Next Generation: A Curator's
Choice,” André Emmerich,
New York

“Inaugural Exhibition,” Salander-O'Reilly
Galleries Inc., New York

1981

“Keller, Saito and Sutton,” Edmonton Art
Gallery, Edmonton, Canada

Basel Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland

Group Show, Watson de Nagy, Houston,
Texas

IV Medellin Biennial, Medellin, Colombia,
South America

Group Show, Clayworks, Studio
Workshop, New York

“Uniquely Painted Prints,” Salander-
O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., New York

“Phoenix,” Alte Oper, Frankfurt, Germany

Group Show, Rubiner Gallery, Royal Oak,
Michigan

“Boxer, Oliitski, Poons, Saito,” Gallery
Ulysses, Vienna, Austria

Group Show, Douglas Drake Gallery,
Kansas City

Group Show, Sarah Y. Rentschler Gallery,
Bridgehampton, New York

Group Show, Ivory Klimpton, San
Francisco, California

1982

Group Show, Martha White Gallery,
Kentucky

Group Show, Ken Heffel Fine Arts,
Vancouver, Canada

“Saito and Roth,” Nicola Jacobs Gallery,
London England

“Saito, Slone and Zox,” Gallery One,
Toronto, Canada

“Contemporary Abstractionists,” Rubiner
Gallery, Royal Oak, Michigan

Basel Art Fair, Basel, Switzerland

1983

Group Show, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries,
Inc., New York

1984

Group Show, Martha White Gallery,
Louisville, Kentucky

Group Show, Hett Gallery, Edmonton,
Canada

Group Show, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries,
Inc., New York

Group Show, Il Punto Blu Gallery,
Southampton, New York

“Artists Choose Artists,” Edmonton Art
Gallery, Edmonton, Canada

1985

“Private Treasures From San Antonio
Collections,” San Antonio Museum,
Texas

Group Show, Griffin-Haller Gallery,
Washington Depot, Connecticut

Group Show, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries,
Inc., New York

“Artist's Salute the Return of Halley's
Comet,” Edith C. Blum Art Institute,
Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson,
New York

1986

Group Show, Robert Kidd Gallery,
Birmingham, Michigan

Group Show, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries,
Inc., New York

Group Show, Gallery Camino Real, Boca
Raton, Florida

- 1987
 "New Abstract Prints," Associated American Artists, New York
 Group Show, John Szoke Gallery, New York
 Group Show, Kathleen Laverty Gallery, Edmonton, Canada
 Group Show, Waddington & Shiell Galleries, Toronto, Canada
 Group Show, Satani Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
 1988
 Group Show, Silvermine Gallery, Stamford, Connecticut
 "Paperworks," John Szoke Gallery, New York
 Group Show, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York
 Group Show, Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London, England
 1989
 "Art for All," Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Canada
 Group Show, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., New York
 Group Show, Dubins Gallery, Los Angeles, California
 Group Show, Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London, England
 "Important Works on Paper," Meredith Long, Houston, Texas
 1990
 "Group: 1990," Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., New York
 [Exhibition celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Peter Stuyvesant Collection], Turmac Tobacco Company B.V., Zevenaar, Netherlands
 "Art '90," London Contemporary Art Fair, International Art Fair, London, England
 "Works on Paper," Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London, England
 Group Show, Stewart Fine Arts, Montreal, Canada
 1991
 "Gallery Selections," Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, February
- Peter Stuyvesant Foundation Collection, Seville and Zaragoza, Spain
 Group Show, Galerie Ulysses, New York
 "Inaugural Exhibition," Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Berlin, Germany
 "15th Anniversary Exhibition," Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan
 1992
 Group Show, Helander Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida
 Group Show, C.S. Schulte Gallery, South Orange, New Jersey
 "Five Years," Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London, England
 "Abstract Painters Who Paint Landscapes," Schulte Gallery, South Orange, New Jersey
 1993
 Group Show, Schultz Gallery, Milburn, New Jersey
 1994
 Group Show, Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton, Florida
 Group Show, Vero Beach Centre for the Arts, Vero Beach, Florida
 1995
 "Olitski, Poons, Saito," Zeckendorf Towers, New York
 Group Show, Steven Haller Gallery, New York
 FIAC, Paris Art Fair, Paris, France
 "Toys R Art," Gallery Camino Real, Boca Raton, Florida
 1996
 "Twentieth Anniversary," Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan.
 "Abstractions," Barbara Scott Gallery, Miami, Florida.
 1998
 "Abstraction II," Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York.
 2001
 Clement Greenberg: A Critic's Collection, Portland Art Museum Portland, Oregon
- 2004
 The Art Festival for World Peace, Shanghai
 2005
 Group Show, Yellowbird Gallery, Newburgh, NY
 Group Show, Gallerie D'Arte Benucci, Rome

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 Graphication, Tokyo, illustration of Saito's "Pink Moon" from 1989 (February 1990)
 Graphication, Tokyo, illustration of a drawing from Saito's "The Black Chair Series" (1995)
 Group: 1990 (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc., 1990)

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- Hall, Charles. "Kikuo Saito," *Art Review*, London (October 1995)
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- Harrison, Helen A. "Abstract Imagery Marks Group Show," *The New York Times* (November 1984)
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- Long, Robert. "Varied Hue at Punto Blue," *The East Hampton Star* (November 1984)
- Mecha, Rene. "The Next Generation: A Curator's Choice," *Art International* (March-April 1981)
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- Tetransky, Valentin. "Clayworks Group Show," *Arts Magazine* (May 1981)
- Tucker, Glen. Review of one-person show, *San Antonio Light* (May 1979)
- Tuchman, Phyllis. "Kikuo Saito at William Edward O'Reilly," *Art in America* (March 1980), illustration
- Twardy, Chuck. "Lateral Movements," *The News & Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina (January 26, 1996): p. 21, illustration
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THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS

1965

Setting for modern dance, Waseda University, Tokyo

1966

Setting for modern dance, lino Hall, Tokyo

1967

Set designed for "Sara B. Divine" by Tom Eyen, Spoleto Festival, Spoleto, Italy

Set for "Tom Paine," directed by Tom O'Horgan, La Mama, New York

Set for "Futz," directed by Tom O'Horgan, La Mama, New York

1972

Sixth Festival of the Arts, Shiraz, Iran, worked on sets for Robert Wilson's theatre piece

Work done on sets for Robert Wilson, Opera Comique, Paris

Wrote and directed film for National Television, Iran

1973

"Haftan," theatre piece at Byrd Hoffman Foundation, New York

1976

"Water Play," theatre piece at La Mama, E.T.C., New York

1979

Set for Peter Brook's "Conference of the Birds," Paris

1996

"Toy Garden," The Ark, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

"Toy Garden," La Mama, E.T.C., New York

2001

"Ash Garden," La Guardia H.S. of Music & Art and Performing Arts, New York

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut

American Telephone & Telegraph, New York

Bain & Co., Boston

Baxter Corp., Greenfield, Illinois

Buchanan Ingersoll, Pittsburgh

Carnegie Center, Princeton

Central Trust Bank, Kansas City

Chevron Oil, Dublin, California

Contempra Fashions International, Montreal, Canada

Continental Insurance, New York

Core Industries, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

Duke University Museum of Art

The Edmonton Art Gallery, Canada

Estee Lauder, New York

Frost Brother, San Antonio, Texas

H & R Block, Kansas City

H. J. Heinz, Pittsburgh

Henly Group, New York

Hines Industrial, Boston

Houston Industries, Houston, Texas

Impact Rug Inc., Montreal, Canada

International Business Machines, New York

International Minerals and Chemicals Corp., Chicago

J.P. Morgan Chase Collection, New York

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Canada

The Lincoln Savings Bank, New York

Midland Finance Company, Chicago

Mitsui & Co., New York

Mony Financial Services, Teaneck, New Jersey

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Northrop, Los Angeles

Pepsico, New York

Pfizer Inc., New York

Queens University, Canada

John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida

Siemens, Germany

Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, Netherlands

TRW Corp., New York

Ulster Museum, Ireland

Unicorp American, New York

University of Lethbridge, Canada

U.S. Equities, Chicago

World Bank, Washington, D.C.

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