

Harrowing caged portraits



Tetsumi Kudo
 Andrea Rosen Gallery
 525 West 24th Street
 212-627-6000,
 andrearosengallery.com
 Through November 16

series of assemblages inside birdcages: grotesqueries of cast body parts in mid-mutation between human and some other alien form. The works are dark but kooky, making bizarre pets — or maybe just heartless decorations — from that which has been cut off, or cast out, by this new ecology. Here behind the wires lies a nose on its side, looking a bit like a melting bird (*Untitled*, c. 1975); flaccid penises with tapered shafts hang around like chubby slugs (*For Your Living Room — For Nostalgic Purpose*, 1966; *Prehistoric Monster in the Cage and People Who Are Looking at It*, 1971). There's a pulpy, sci-fi silliness to these brainless creatures, their toxicity and creepiness offset by the artist's irradiated Technicolor palette.

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Kudo also created caged portraits — harrowing, solemn, contemplative — in which pieces of men's faces and hands are cooped up alongside artificial flowers, birds, and other nods to the natural world. Without bodies, blood, or guts, these figures are mere husks of selves long gone. They largely go unnamed save in *Votre Portrait* (1974), made in the likeness of the playwright Eugène Ionesco, and some others in which the figure is identified as "artist." Although these faces bear no likeness to Kudo, they might at least be read as portraits of a spinning yet unraveling mind. The weary man in *Portrait of Artist in the Crisis* (1978) knits a rainbow-hued rope — a lifeline? — that snakes in and out of his cage, while a spider lingers near the third eye of the mossy character in *Portrait de l'Artiste* (1976), whose fingers are tethered by thin multicolored strings to the bars of his hutch.

In the second room of the exhibition are sculptures Kudo made from 1982 to 1987. The strings that once tied the artist down (metaphorically, anyhow) are now the swirling material from which he fabricates new cosmic terrains, more beautiful, perhaps, but no less menacing than before. *Valsez Avec le Trou Noir!* (*Waltz With a Black Hole!*, 1982) is a kind of narrow stalagmite (or a 3-D map of a galactic hiccup) made of multicolored strings wound tightly around and around. On its shoulder, a flat black funnel-like object — the black hole, one presumes, a portal into which a thing is drawn and destroyed. The only way to know what the wreckage will bring is to move through the destruction, the unknown. From disorder and dissolution, Kudo seems to say, will come the new vision.

ART

Humanity, Gutted

Visiting with Tetsumi Kudo's fantasy of a new ecology

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

There are too few opportunities to see the work of the notorious Tetsumi Kudo (1935–90), which is reason enough to visit the modest but explosive exhibition of selected works on view at Andrea Rosen Gallery. Another reason? To spend time in the presence of art born not of strategy and sheer market ambition, but of an unabashedly quixotic desire to create a new vision for the world.

Is the human survival instinct necessarily virtuous? Is self-preservation a mark of success? Kudo, who came of age

in post-Hiroshima Japan, found within the devastation of his country an opportunity to think against convention, and to promote the freedoms made possible when humanity find itself at ground zero. As a young artist living in Tokyo in the late Fifties, he became part of the "anti art" movement that embraced using found materials, the fat and detritus of the world, to speak about it. By the early Sixties, Kudo had formulated his provocative "philosophy of impotence," which asserted an almost puritanical position regarding sex: that we should strive to be

released, shall we say, from the human need for its own seed.

How serious was he? Kudo wasn't just a "divining rod artist," someone who leads the way to new wellsprings; he was a showman, an incendiary character with a flair for attracting attention and making forceful, declarative statements through his paintings, performances, and sculptures. In one of his most infamous happenings, a 1963 performance titled "Hara-kiri of Humanism," he feigned the samurai's ritual suicide, letting all in attendance know that tradition was officially dead, that humanity had in effect gutted itself. In 1971 he wrote a manifesto titled "Pollution — Cultivation — New Ecology," in which he asserted that the perfect storm of pollution, technology, and a dusty humanism were "decomposing and interpenetrating, each against the others (humanity against nature, humanity against mechanism...) and will come to form a completely new ecology in our society and in the cosmos." The great obsolescence would be the human body.

From 1965 to 1981, Kudo created a