Kikuo Saito: Dancing Across the Surface
December 1, 2021 - January 16, 2022
We are pleased to exhibit a selection of Kikuo Saito works in the Lower Gallery. Our exhibition includes two works from the 1980s, which feature his earlier formal vocabulary of invented calligraphic marks layered over color fields, and Sea Sango from 2009, which exemplifies the layered, sprawling calligraphy of his late paintings.

“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.”

John Dorfman
Sea Sango, 2009
acrylic on canvas
53 1/4 x 67 1/2 inches
(135.3 x 171.5 cm)
Painted in 2009, *Sea Sango* is a remarkable example of the loose, colorful style that Saito painted in during the final years of his life and career. Works from this period have been widely collected in both private and corporate collections, along with select public collections.

Quenka, 2012  
oil on canvas  
65 1/4 × 44 3/4 inches  
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

“[Saito’s late works] can also be accurately described as triumphant summations of decades of exploration. They seem to be the most passionate, free-wheeling iterations, to date, of many of the various dominant themes visible in his work.”

Karen Wilkin
Azalea, 1981
oil on canvas
52 x 90 1/2 inches
(132.1 x 229.9 cm)
Azalea exemplifies Saito’s style in the late 1970s and early 1980s, for which he initially gained recognition. Originally working as a set designer in Tokyo, Saito moved to the United States in 1966 and continued to design sets for theatrical and modern dance productions. At the same time, Saito began working as a studio assistant to legendary painters like Helen Frankenthaler, Larry Poons, and Kenneth Noland.

Saito pursued his own painting career on the side, and eventually abandoned his theatrical work to focus more intently on painting. During this time, Saito developed his early trademark style of Color Field abstraction mixed with calligraphic flourishes. These flourishes were not derived from English or Japanese; they were a language of Saito’s own invention, serving as an additional layer of abstraction over his colorful forms.

These works are also widely collected, including an early Color Field work at the Museum of Modern Art.

*Untitled*, 1980
paint on handmade paper
30 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
McCoy’s Moon, 1989
oil on canvas
36 1/4 x 45 1/2 inches
(92.1 x 115.6 cm)
“McCoy’s Moon”
1989

Kivrin Santos

36 1/4 x 45

McCoy’s Moon, signed by the artist on verso
"It's perhaps not an overstatement to say that when we, as viewers, attempt to come to terms with Saito's invented calligraphy, now plainly visible, now veiled by layers of paint, we recapitulate the artist's youthful experience of arriving in New York and being confronted by a new language and a new alphabet. The sensuality of Saito's color and the physicality of his paint handling could be equivalents for his pleasure in overcoming those challenges."

Karen Wilkin