

## Transformations: Tamiko Kawata

by William Baran-Mickle

Safety pins: more or less invisible to most people, to Tamiko Kawata they are the quintessential artistic medium. Her discovery of safety pins as art resulted from an intuitive exploration that combined her professional background as a designer in Japan with the practical solution of pinning American clothes to fit her Japanese frame after her arrival in the United States in 1962. In a pile of pins at Woolworth's, Kawata saw her future medium.

Trained in sculpture at Tokyo University of Education, Kawata uses safety pins in category-defying ways, in works that range from experimental jewelry to outdoor sculptures. Jack Lenor Larsen and Mildred Constantine included Kawata's work (listed under "Ferguson," her name at the time) in their seminal book *The Art Fabric: Mainstream* (1981), grouping Kawata's wall pieces with those of Lenore Tawney, Harry Boom, and Magdalena Abakanowicz.

The themes of Kawata's work range from poetic statements of relationships and urban details to political symbolism. Her work upends the idea that there is a limited color palette to industrial safety pins by seducing the eye with a richness of patterning and the unexpected visual excitement created by masses of pins.

Structurally, the work is ingenious. Kawata does not use glue, solder, or other forms of attachment, yet some pieces use over 100,000 interconnected pins. Their structural characteristics, such as weight, tension, temper, and hinge mechanisms, become large engineering issues. Perseverance is an invaluable asset when working in this medium.

Kawata's early work with safety pins straddled the fields of textile and metal arts. Early wall works, like fabric samples, consisted of patches of pins assembled in squares that alternated their direction to cover a field. The availability of different colors of pins

allowed her to cleverly thread colors to create visual interest. These flat works display a weaver's precision, geometry, and order.

When Kawata began removing her flat work from the wall, she discovered three unusual qualities of safety pins



that she would later exploit dramatically: flexibility, tactility, and gravity. Fields of safety pins doubled over make elegant statements, taking on dimensional qualities and mystery. *Soft Box* (1996) is intriguing, its tactile sensation of gently shifting pins oddly comforting. *Flexible Square, Mountain Wave* (1991) uses the safety pin's limited flexibility to bunch up the square format into an asymmetrical heap. As the surface pattern changes and the density increases, the form softens from its original formality, adding an emotional element that opens up greater possibilities for sculptural applications.

Kawata's large draped and clustered safety pin installations were recently seen on the grounds of LongHouse Reserve, East Hampton, New York, in the show "Transformations: The Brilliant Art of Tamiko Kawata." In



*Installation on Trees*, 1999. Safety pins, 20 ft. long. Two details of two-part installation.

*Gentian Clusters* (1999), one group of 11 pin baskets, encrusted with colored paper pulp, occupies a position between the ground and the rise of a tree. The effect is surreal, somewhere between a multicolored coral habitat and a pile of discarded industrial paper baskets. This portion of the installation sits in vibrant contrast to the surrounding landscape. A second set of 25 baskets startles as one looks up, expecting the greens and browns of the tree, and seeing instead a cluster of red, yellow, and white baskets dangling from more than seven feet overhead, like so many bananas or perhaps a Dale Chihuly hanging glass cluster. The effect of these spreading forms is futuristic, as the steely presence merges with surreal





Left and detail: *Gentian Clusters*, 1999. Safety pins and paper, 23 x 12 ft. One part of a two-part installation. Below: *August Grove*, 1999. Safety pins and pine bark, 30-foot space containing cylinders 18–40 in. high.



for sculptural possibilities. Kawata has often used these tubes in groupings, varying their height and color within a line or grid pattern, in works ranging from small to large. The largest of these arrangements to date is *August Grove* (1999), a tube cluster installation at the LongHouse Reserve. The 77-column sculpture exemplifies the cultural/political range of her subjects, but has personal dimensions as well. These tube forms symbolize the modern-day lanterns set adrift on small lakes or rivers in Japan, in the tradition called *Bon*, a Buddhist All Souls Day, which is celebrated in August, the month the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. These symbolic vessels carry the souls of war victims to heaven.

Kawata also uses tube structures singly or in pairs. In *Protrusion* (1993), the companion piece to *Crevice*, a single phallic form rises out of a large helter-skelter circle of bunched-up pins. The silver color and detailed pattern of the cylinder's wall give it a prettiness that adds to the work's dynamic content. On a larger scale, 30- to 40-foot-long tubes creep up and around trees in *Crawling Cylinders* (1999). Mounted on a tall multi-trunk tree, these snake-forms seem frozen in their climb 25 to 30 feet up to the tree's canopy—their thin, bright, steely skin in stark contrast to the bark's texture. The structures are planned so that they will rust at different rates, to mirror the natural condition of aging. As they swoop, cling, and wind their way among the weighty, dense trunks, the cylinders' airy delicacy is all the more pronounced. The mingling of the shadows cast by the pin patterns on the bark is delightful.



Kawata is capable of creating a sublime experience for the viewer. *Rain Forest* (1998), originally installed at Vibrant Gallery at Maru Creative in New York, uses nearly 40,000 safety pins to fill a 45-by-30-foot room with individual streams of rainfall that drop nine feet to floor level and then spiral outward in concentric circles. The black pins symbolize nuclear rain and acid rain; the silver ones represent pure, clean rain. The installation conjures a frozen moment, a suspension of time, in which one may sense the natural and manmade forces co-existing in today's world.

Tamiko Kawata's works reflect our human condition through observations made more acute by the experience of one who lives both inside and outside two cultures. Her works also reflect the urban setting where she has made her home, with its millions of inhabitants who, when viewed closely (like Kawata's safety pins), reveal a character that is rich and brilliant.

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color to create a mysterious chrysalid encounter.

Kawata uses the steely pins' verve to achieve surprising effects. Airiness can turn to a rich, mysterious density, as in *Black Sphere* (1990). Like a ball of string, it is Minimalist in its overall simplicity, yet excessive, even obsessive, in its use of thousands of connected safety pins. In *Crevice* (1993), her dense, podlike cluster-form has a subtle V-shaped indent, which penetrates about three-quarters of the sculpture's depth. The visual effect of these masses of safety pins is contradictory. While they appear fuzzy from a distance, as one approaches the sculptures, intricate details and complex structures are revealed.

Kawata discovered that she could create tubes that to some degree defy gravity. Beginning with a domed end structure, columns may be placed vertically, horizontally, or in gently undulating wave forms. Their relatively light weight allows them to be suspended in air, an exciting dimension