

Kazuya Sakai in Texas

Lillian Michel

How did an Argentine artist, critic, translator, jazz expert, radio host, graphic designer, professor, and pioneer of geometric abstraction in Mexico come to retire in Richardson, Texas?

Such a singular person was Kazuya Sakai (Figure 1). For the final 24 years of his prolific career, he lived in Texas. He was a professor at three schools in the UT System, including for sixteen years at UT Dallas. And yet, he is an underrecognized figure in the state today. To be sure, traces of his work remain. For example, a painting by him in the collection of the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin has been prominently displayed there for years, although the online object label acknowledges his marginal status.¹ “Kazuya Sakai’s internationalism (he was born in Argentina of Japanese parents and lived in Argentina, Japan, Mexico, and the United States) has ironically obscured his contribution to Latin American art,” the label states. “Few art histories mention him, perhaps because he is too difficult to categorize.”

This article intends to document how Kazuya Sakai arrived in Texas, and to recover what he accomplished in the state. It will focus on his visual art, the exhibitions of his major series, and his professional appointments, respectfully omitting attention to his critical writing and musical expertise. By gathering and making available the accessible information on Sakai’s years in Texas, future histories about the artist might no longer need to end so abruptly after his career in Mexico, the country where he produced his most popular body of work and, arguably, where he received the most recognition.

¹ *Filles de Kilimanjaro III (Miles Davis)*, Blanton Museum of Art, accessed January 28, 2020, collection.blantonmuseum.org/objects-1/info/15140.



Roberto Kazuya Sakai was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina on October 1, 1927. (He rarely used the name Roberto. Friends called him Sakai.) His parents were Japanese. In around 1935 (there is conflicting information about the exact year), Sakai moved to Japan, where he completed his education. In 1951, he returned to Argentina, where he worked on translating texts on Japanese theater, as well as works of Japanese and Buddhist literature, into Spanish. He also taught at universities, published writing, and hosted radio programs on jazz and other modern music.² In Argentina, Sakai taught himself to paint, and had his first gallery solo exhibition in 1952. He quickly established a reputation among the country's leading gestural abstract painters, where he was grouped early on with artists José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Sarah Grilo, Clorindo Testa, and Miguel Ocampo.³

² Pamphlet for the exhibition *Kazuya Sakai: Obra Reciente Pintura* at the Instituto Cultural Mexicano in San Antonio, February-March 1989. Hamon Arts Library.

³ Jorge Romero Brest, "[Los cinco pintores que me honro en presentar...]," in *F-Muro, Grilo, Ocampo, Sakai, Testa* exhibition catalog (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1960), accessed January 28, 2020 icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/762815/language/en-US/.

Figure 1 Photograph of Kazuya Sakai, published in *UTD Advance*, March 1981. UT Dallas Office of Communications Collection, University Archives. Special Collections and Archives Division, Eugene McDermott Library, The University of Texas at Dallas.

Audiences in North Texas might first have seen his work in a 1959 exhibition organized by the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, *South American Art Today*, that included an abstract painting by Sakai, one of sixteen artists representing Argentina (Figure 2).⁴ *Composition No. 81* (1958) is a vertical oil painting, with a flurry of dark brushstrokes and drips that resemble splattered ink, on a stark background. The black gestural brushstrokes in his paintings from this period were said to be related to Japanese calligraphic brushwork.⁵ To varying degrees, he would take inspiration from Japanese artistic traditions throughout his career.⁶

From Buenos Aires, he went to New York City in 1963. Sakai's reasons for leaving Argentina are not certain, but several other Argentine painters, including Fernandez-Muro and Grilo, moved to New York City around the same time.⁷ Galeria Bonino—a prominent Buenos Aires gallery that had shown Sakai's work—opened a location in New York City in 1963.⁸ This attraction to the city was the subject of *Magnet: New York*, a 1964 exhibition at Galeria Bonino of works by twenty-eight Latin American artists living in New York City.⁹ Sakai showed *The Bridge* (1964), a square painting with pieces of text peeking through swaths of acrylic paint. He gave this title to several later paintings, some with the subtitle *S. Rollins*, indicating that the name derived from an album by the jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins.¹⁰ Sakai experimented with different styles during his time in New York. He painted in oil, acrylic, and watercolor, sometimes adding collage elements. Although Sakai's stint in New York lasted only two years, it can be considered a transitional period that put him on track to realize his later, most-recognized paintings.

4 Jerry Bywaters and Jose Gomez-Sicre, *South American Art Today* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1959), 15.

5 Erin Aldana, "Kazuya Sakai," in *Blanton Museum of Art: Latin American Collection*, ed. Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro (Austin: Blanton Museum of Art, 2006), 367.

6 See Kana Takaki, "Kazuya Sakai and Latin American "New Art": Migrations and Expressions of a Kikoku Nisei artist" (doctoral thesis, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2018).

7 See Daniel Garza Usabiaga, *Kazuya Sakai en México, 1965-1977: pintura, diseño, crítica, música* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes / Museo de Arte Moderno, 2016), 22 and Thomas M. Messer, *The Emergent Decade: Latin American Painters and Painting in the 1960s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 63.

8 "[The Galería Bonino, in its ten years in New York...]," c. 1973. Typed manuscript. Galería Bonino archive, Fundación Espigas, Buenos Aires, accessed December 7, 2019 icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/766390/language/en-US/.

9 Robert M. Wool and Thomas M. Messer, *Magnet: New York* (New York: Inter-American Foundation for the Arts, 1964).

10 Pamphlet for the exhibition *Kazuya Sakai* at Galeria Juan Martin in Mexico City, August 24–September 18, 1967. Artist file for Kazuya Sakai, Mildred R. and Frederick M. Mayer Library, Dallas Museum of Art.

Sakai left New York in 1965, moving to Mexico City to take a position at the Colegio de Mexico as a professor in the department of Oriental Studies. He spent twelve intense years in Mexico City, between 1965 and 1977. His contributions to the contemporary art scene there can hardly be summarized in a few paragraphs, and have been the subject of a recent exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM) in Mexico City. To trace Sakai's eventual move from Mexico to Texas, we can focus on two aspects of his career in Mexico City: his role as a pioneer of geometric abstraction and his leadership at *Plural* magazine.

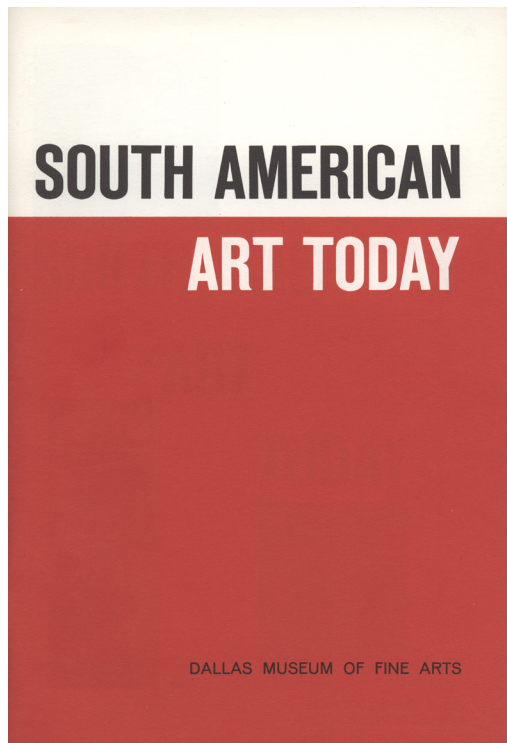
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The same year he arrived in Mexico, Sakai had his first solo exhibition at Galeria Juan Martin, which became his principal gallery for almost thirty years. In the late 1960s, Sakai's paintings changed from gestural to geometric, and he is now acknowledged as one of the first artists to exhibit abstract geometric art in Mexico. In his works, he introduced strips of paint with hard edges as well as large areas and shapes of solid color, and eventually eliminated the appearance of brushstrokes. Circular forms began to appear in his paintings around 1973.

These evolutions culminated in the series *Ondulaciones* (undulations). The vibrant acrylic paintings in this series all have monochrome backgrounds and feature hard-edge bands of parallel colors that enter the canvas vertically or horizontally, and then curve and twist to form concentric circles. The paintings are variations on a theme (although almost none are identical in design) in which Sakai gives primary attention to color and experiments with a rainbow of combinations. The majority of the works are titled after composers or musical compositions, making clear their relationship to their author's love of jazz and experimental music and indicating that the series is perhaps "a synesthetic exercise in which [Sakai] seeks to give visibility, through various pictorial strategies, to sound and, specifically, to music."¹¹ *Ondulaciones* was also inspired by the Japanese artist Ogata Kōrin (1658-1716), a member of the Rinpa School of artists known for their colorful, decorative and patterned style of painting, inspired by nature. In 1975, Sakai published *Homenaje a Kōrin* (Homage to Kōrin), a limited edition book of prints that can be considered exercises for the *Ondulaciones* paintings. In the introduction he expresses his admiration for Kōrin's geometric depictions of nature through "repeated curves, circles, and sinuous lines that flow without beginning or apparent end."¹²

11 Daniel Garza Usabiaga, *Kazuya Sakai en México, 1965-1977*, 39.

12 Kazuya Sakai, introduction to *Homenaje a Kōrin* (Mexico City: Madero, 1975). Author's translation.



12

KAZUYA SAKAI

Born of Japanese parents in Buenos Aires in 1927, Sakai received his early education in Japan. He has participated in several group shows, including the display of Argentine painting at the Brussels World Fair and the First Biennial of Inter-American Art held in Mexico in 1958.

12. Composition No. 81, 1958
oil, 44 x 60



ARGENTINA

Figure 2 *South American Art Today*, October–November 1959. Courtesy Dallas Museum of Art.

The series earned Sakai his first solo exhibition at the MAM in Mexico City, *Kazuya Sakai, Pinturas: Ondulaciones cromáticas y simultáneas*, in 1976. The presentation featured thirty-three works completed in 1975 and 1976. In a note in the exhibition catalog, Sakai dedicated the show “a la música”—to music. Fernando Gamboa, director of the MAM, wrote in the catalog’s introduction:

“Like many important artists who arrived from other parts of the world and settled here to Mexico’s benefit, Kazuya Sakai has produced during his ten years of residence a strong pictorial oeuvre that has reverberated in our scene and has exercised a healthy influence on young artists. But the incorporation of Sakai into Mexican art extends to our culture in general, thanks to his magnificent activities as a university professor, writer, conferencist, translator, editor and expert in jazz music.

Sakai’s strong personality, his talent, and the great aesthetic quality of his painting have caused three countries to claim him: Argentina, the country of his birth, Mexico, his chosen home country, and Japan, the country of his familial descentance.”¹³

13 Fernando Gamboa, introduction to *Kazuya Sakai, Pinturas: Ondulaciones cromáticas y simultáneas* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes / Museo de Arte Moderno, 1976). Author’s translation.

As Gamboa noted, being an artist was only one of Sakai's occupations in Mexico City. He hosted multiple shows on jazz and contemporary music for two radio stations, Radio Universidad and Radio Educación.¹⁴ In 1967, he left the Colegio de Mexico and later became a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), where he taught in the School of Philosophy and Letters.¹⁵ He stopped teaching at Mexican institutions between 1971 and 1977 (although he spent the Spring 1973 semester in the United States as a visiting professor at the University of Iowa).¹⁶ During that period, he devoted his time to making art and to his responsibilities at the new magazine, *Plural*.

Plural was an influential arts and literature magazine founded in 1971 and directed by the poet Octavio Paz. The magazine was published monthly by the Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior*. Sakai was involved with the magazine from its earliest issues, and from 1972 until its termination in 1976, Sakai was *Plural's* managing editor and artistic director.¹⁷ In addition to contributing articles to the publication he oversaw its graphic identity, which demonstrated his interest in color and eventually included his signature bands and circles. *Plural's* pages were filled with essays by writers from within and beyond Latin America, including Juan Acha, Lawrence Alloway, Dore Ashton, Jorge Romero Brest, and Harold Rosenberg.¹⁸

Among the frequent contributors to *Plural* was Damián Bayón, an art critic (and writer and curator and professor) who was born in Argentina but lived and worked in several countries throughout his life. Bayón and Sakai were close friends. Bayón had written the first-ever catalog essay for an exhibition of Sakai's in 1957, and he would write many essays about his friend's work throughout his career that show a profound admiration for both the art and the artist.¹⁹ Bayón, who was hired as a visiting professor of art history at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in 1973, became a key figure in bringing Sakai to Texas.²⁰ Later, Bayón claimed that his dissemination of issues of *Plural* among colleagues at UT sparked the idea—coordinated by Rodolfo Cardona, chairman of the UT Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and Donald Goodall, director of University Art Collections—to host a contemporary art exhibition and symposium

14 Aldana, 367.

15 Daniel Garza Usabiaga, *Kazuya Sakai en México*, 1965-1977, 23.

16 "New works represented in museum art shows," *The Daily Iowan* (Iowa City, IA), March 7, 1973.

17 Daniel Garza Usabiaga, *Kazuya Sakai en México*, 1965-1977, 29, 51.

18 John King, *The Role of Mexico's Plural in Latin American Literary and Political Culture: From Tlatelolco to the "Philanthropic Ogre"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 140.

19 King, *The Role of Mexico's Plural in Latin American Literary and Political Culture*, 141.

20 Andrea Giunta, "A Focal Point for Art: UT's Center for Latin American Visual Studies," *Portal*, Issue 6, 2011, repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/62059

as part of a larger celebration of Latin American culture, a region of focus in which the university was (and is) renowned.²¹

In October of 1975, UT's College of Fine Arts hosted its 34th Annual Fine Arts Festival with public programs, performances, and exhibitions all themed around "The Arts of Latin America."²² Sakai and Bayón were two of the lead organizers of a historic symposium taking place in conjunction with the festival. *Excelsior*, UT's Institute of Latin American Studies, the College of Humanities, and the College of Fine Arts together sponsored "Speak Out! Charla! Bate-Papo!: A Symposium on Contemporary Art and Literature in Latin America."²³ Critics, artists, art historians, writers, gallerists, and more—including the renowned Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo—gathered at UT from October 27 to 29 to discuss the notion of a distinct Latin American identity in contemporary art. Sakai chaired a panel on the second day; the conversation ranged from what defines the Latin American identity to the Western influence on the region's art to the purpose of art criticism in Latin American countries.²⁴

For the occasion, Sakai and Bayón co-curated an exhibition for the university art museum (today called the Blanton Museum of Art), *12 Latin American Artists Today*. The exhibition was comprised of paintings and sculptures by twelve stylistically diverse artists: Marcelo Bonevardi, Sergio de Camargo, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Manuel Felguérez, Gunther Gerzo, Roger von Gunten, Edgar Negret, Brian Nissen, Vicente Rojo, Fernando de Szyszlo, Luis Tomasello, and Francisco Toledo.²⁵ The bilingual exhibition catalog repurposed columns on the featured artists that were previously published in *Plural*.²⁶ "Speaking seriously, this is one of the best shows in the world," declared Bayón in a review in the *Austin American-Statesman*.²⁷

Sakai soon joined his co-curator in Austin. In 1976, Sakai became the Edward Larocque Tinker Chair in Latin American Studies at UT, a year-long appointment, and taught courses in painting during the spring and summer of 1977.²⁸ On February 6, 1977, a solo exhibition of Sakai's work opened at the university art museum.

21 Damián Bayón, *El Artista Latinoamericano y Su Identidad* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1977), 15.

22 Patrick Taggart, "UT fest surveys art below the border: Latin America and art," *Austin American-Statesman*, Oct. 12, 1975.

23 "Symposium to honor Latin American artists, writers," *Austin American-Statesman*, Oct. 7, 1975.

24 Damián Bayón, *El Artista Latinoamericano y Su Identidad* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1977), 61.

25 Bayón, *El Artista Latinoamericano*, 16.

26 Donald B. Goodall et al., *12 Latin American Artists Today (12 artistas latino americanos de hoy)* (Mexico City; *Plural*, 1975).

27 Mary McIntyre, "Sampling Latin America's best art," *Austin American-Statesman*, Oct. 12, 1975.

28 Minutes from the UT System Board of Regents meeting, February 11, 1977, 5 www.utsystem.edu/board-of-regents/meetings/board-meeting-1977-02-11, and Minutes from the UT System Board of Regent meeting, April 15, 1977, 19 www.utsystem.edu/board-of-regents/meetings/board-meeting-1977-04-15.



Figure 3 Kazuya Sakai, *Filles de Kilimanjaro III (Miles Davis)*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 200.6 x 200 cm (79 x 78 3/4 in.). Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Archer M. Huntington Museum Fund, 1977.



Figure 4 Kazuya Sakai, *Untitled*, 1975. Screenprint, 55.9 x 55.9 cm (22 x 22 in.). Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Dr. Damián Bayón, 1977.

Figure 5 Kazuya Sakai, *Miles Davis, A Tribute to Jack Johnson (II) Right Off*, 1973. Acrylic on raw canvas, 154.5 x 109.1 cm (60 13/16 x 42 15/16 in.). Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Archer M. Huntington Museum Fund, 1974.

The exhibition was jointly organized with the MAM in Mexico City and included works from the MAM's Ondulaciones exhibition the previous year. In Austin, the show was titled *Kazuya Sakai, Paintings: A La Música*.

"*To Music* is not just a fortuitous title Kazuya Sakai has found to introduce his latest works, it represents in fact the *real presence of music* in everything he does in his paintings," wrote Bayón in the catalog introduction, new to the Austin presentation. "In the case of Kazuya Sakai we can say that he almost literally 'composes' his paintings as a musician might compose a musical piece."

Two works by Sakai were acquired by the Blanton Museum of Art in 1977: a painting, *Filles de Kilimanjaro III (Miles Davis)* (1976), and an untitled print (1975) inscribed with the dedication "Para Damián, maestro, amigo" (For Damián, teacher, friend), that was gifted to the museum by Bayón (Figures 3 and 4). These works joined *Miles Davis, A Tribute to Jack Johnson (II) Right Off*, a painting that entered the Blanton's collection in 1974 (Figure 5). Around this time, another painting, *Moses and Aron (Arnold Schoenberg)* (1976), was donated to UT's Institute of Latin American Studies.²⁹

When his teaching appointment in Austin ended, Sakai took another position within the UT System. In the fall of 1977, he became a visiting professor of painting in the College of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA).³⁰ The appointment was not intended to last more than a year, but students reportedly signed a petition to keep Sakai at the school longer.³¹ He taught at UTSA through 1979 and showed work in local galleries (Figure 6).

Music remained central to Sakai's life. A profile in the *Texas Times* (a UT System publication) reported that the UTSA professor produced a show of jazz and contemporary music at his home and then mailed the recording to a radio station in Mexico City.³² In the article, Sakai laments that "people throughout the world are refusing to accept the visual arts, music and literature of the twentieth-century...Instead

29 Ryan Lynch, Head of Special Collections and Senior Archivist at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection says "according to a former staff member, the artist donated it to LILLAS sometime before 2003." The 1979 McNay catalog checklist lists the painting *Moses und Aron/Schoenberg* (1976) as being in the collection of the University of Texas at Austin, Institute of Latin American Studies.

30 UTSA 1977-1978 Faculty and Staff Directory, 9. UTSA Special Collections

31 Michael F. Kelly, letter to Committee Members, January 24, 1980. University Archives, University of Texas at Dallas

32 Shirley Wills, "Helping the public appreciate jazz and other modern arts," *Texas Times*, January/February 1978, p. 10.



they are revering the art of the past.” The music program—like his teaching—was his contribution to closing the public knowledge gap about modern developments in art. He concluded more optimistically, advocating that “art is a part of our spiritual life. The arts give joy, communicate feeling and can help people better understand themselves.”

The Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute in San Antonio opened a solo exhibition of Sakai’s work in April 1979. *Kazuya Sakai: Paintings, Constructions, Reliefs* showed abstract geometric works made between 1976 and 1979. The exhibition featured recent work, in addition to paintings that were previously shown in Mexico City and Austin. The new work included paintings on shaped canvases that protruded from the wall, and wood and plastic “constructions” made of several pieces. The checklist for the exhibition even included a peculiar “object [of] 16 interchangeable pieces (10 x 10 in.) in box to play an imaginary go game.”³³ In the new paintings, the previously uninterrupted, flowing bands and circles of color were now sliced and overlapped. The bands were different too; instead of being composed of many distinct colors they had gradients of colors, and the lines entered the canvas in new directions, and rippled rather than taking sharp turns.

Bayón wrote a review of the show titled “Kazuya Sakai en Tejas” (Kazuya Sakai in Texas) for *Horizontes*, a magazine published by the humanities department at UNAM.³⁴ Of the new works, Bayón said “there is in everything a real movement that before didn’t exist.” He notes that many of the works are halfway between painting and sculpture, and speculates that in the near future Sakai might explore three-dimensional works more fully. Bayón was writing in 1979, when Sakai had spent three years in Texas; perhaps neither the writer nor the artist could have imagined that the state would become Sakai’s home for the remainder of his life. Bayón left Texas (which he endearingly referred to as a “prairie with libraries”) for Paris that year.

Sakai’s first exhibition in Dallas actually preceded his relocation to the city. An exhibition of *Ondulaciones* works opened in January of 1980 at Contemporary Gallery, located in Uptown’s Quadrangle.³⁵ Early that same year, he was being considered for a permanent position as a professor of painting and drawing at the relatively young University of Texas at Dallas. Admired for his range of experience, he was selected for the job. “It is most unusual to find a practicing studio artist able to bridge the gap between creativity and criticism and to be willing, as Sakai clearly is, to teach truly

33 *Kazuya Sakai: Paintings, Constructions, Reliefs*, 1976-79 (San Antonio: Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, 1979).

34 Damián Bayón, “Kasuya Sakai en Tejas,” *Horizontes*, May/June 1980, 24-25.

35 Janet Kutner, “Art mixes Latin America, Orient,” *Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 12, 1980.



Figure 6 UTSA Art Faculty Exhibition poster, 1979. UTSA Art Gallery Exhibition Records, UA 10.01.01, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

interdisciplinary courses,” wrote the search committee in its recommendation letter to the Vice President of Academic Affairs.³⁶

Sakai started at UT Dallas in the fall of 1980 as an associate professor in the School of Arts and Humanities, teaching studio art courses for undergraduate students and graduate courses in aesthetic studies.³⁷ “I wish for a very strong visual arts department...it is possible because this is a young university, not worrying about old traditions,” Sakai proclaimed in an interview published in the March 1981 issue of *ADVANCE*, a UT Dallas publication.³⁸ The article is a charming introduction to the new professor and an early documentation of his personal aspirations for UT D’s art department. “Here we have the real chance to do things unthinkable in other places,” he declared. An exhibition of Sakai’s work made between 1978 and 1981 was held in UTD’s McDermott Library that spring, poetically titled *The Sky of Texas*.³⁹

36 Interoffice memorandum from Gavin R. G. Hambly to Dr. Alexander Clark, May 7, 1980. University Archives, University of Texas at Dallas.

37 “New semester brings new faculty members,” *UTD ADVANCE* 17, no. 1 (October 1980): 1.

38 “Artist Kazuya Sakai committed to contemporary,” *UTD ADVANCE* 17, no. 5 (March 1981): 1.

39 “Abstract Art Exhibition to open April 13 at UT-Dallas,” News from UT Dallas, April 8, 1981. University Archives, University of Texas at Dallas.

After moving to Dallas (technically, to Richardson), Sakai began the *Genroku* series of paintings, named after the prosperous and culturally flourishing period of Japanese history from 1688 to 1704 (Figure 7). As Sakai described it, *Genroku* connoted “the combination of a severe, ascetical geometry, a love of artisanry, and a certain decorativeness, with an eccentricity and boldness rarely seen in Japanese art.” He saw in *Genroku* “the union of the spiritual with the extravagant.”⁴⁰ A departure from his previous geometric work, the *Genroku* canvases feature layered planes and forms that resemble abstract clouds, waves, mountains, and terrains, existing impossibly but elegantly aside one another. The works, all done in acrylic paint, maintain a lively color scheme but return to having a painterly quality, much more so than the geometric works that dated to his years in Mexico.

This series was presented as his second solo exhibition at Mexico City’s MAM in 1987, *Kazuya Sakai: Serie Genroku*. “In presenting Sakai’s work now, the Museum of Modern Art feels in some way as if it is receiving a prodigal son, in this new phase of his aesthetic life in which he is recovering, within basic geometric patterns, a good dose of lyricism,” wrote Jorge Alberto Manrique, director of the MAM, in the exhibition catalog.⁴¹

The kinship expressed by Manrique is one indication of the strong connections that Sakai retained to Mexico City. Another is provided by Teresa del Conde’s statement in an interview with the artist for the catalog: “Sakai, we all know, is not Mexican, but his residence of fourteen years in this country and his retainment of ties with it assimilates him to our artistic field.”⁴² In 1989, the *Genroku* series was shown at the Mexican Cultural Institute in San Antonio.

On several occasions Sakai was referred to as a Mexican artist in Texas newspapers.⁴³ The misidentification is somewhat understandable, as he had arrived in Texas from Mexico. He had more solo exhibitions in Mexico than he did in the U.S. He showed his art at a handful of galleries in San Antonio and Dallas, but his main gallery remained Galeria Juan Martin in Mexico City. Despite two early museum exhibitions in Austin and San Antonio, Sakai’s later work was not as recognized by Texas art museums. In 2016, the MAM in Mexico City organized an exhibition dedicated to the work Sakai had produced

40 Kazuya Sakai, “Kazuya Sakai: Una Larga Conversacion,” interview by Teresa del Conde, *Kazuya Sakai: Serie Genroku* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes / Museo de Arte Moderno, 1987), 24. Author’s translation.

41 Jorge Alberto Manrique, introduction to *Kazuya Sakai: Serie Genroku* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes / Museo de Arte Moderno, 1987). Author’s translation.

42 Teresa del Conde, “Kazuya Sakai: Una Larga Conversacion,” in *Kazuya Sakai: Serie Genroku* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes / Museo de Arte Moderno, 1987), 19. Author’s translation.

43 Dan R. Goddard, “Art Watch Acosta makes case for mural tradition,” *San Antonio Express-News* (San Antonio, TX), June 16, 1991, and “Museum & Galleries,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 6, 1977.



Figure 7 Kazuya Sakai, *Serie Genroku N 89, Retorno a Matsushima 3 (Genroku Series No. 89, Return to Matsushima 3)*, 1988-89, Acrylic and collage on canvas, 180 x 180 cm. Courtesy Galeria Vasari, Buenos Aires.

during his twelve years of residence in that city, covering painting, design, and criticism. There has been no exhibition in Texas devoted to the almost twenty-five years he lived here and no full-career retrospective for him in any of Argentina's major museums. The geometric paintings he produced mostly in Mexico remain his best-known works. For all of those reasons, his legacy is aligned with Mexico.

But Sakai produced highly original work in Texas. In the mid-1980s, he became interested in computer-generated art, resulting in the *Sky* series of prints. They are boldly colorful serigraphs, with solid and gradient blocks of color, as well as streaks and squiggles. To me, they resemble the sort of graphics that accompany experimental music performances today. They have numeric titles, like *SKY 15C*, *SKY 19*, and *SKY 27A*.

The *Sky* series was exhibited at Galeria Juan Martin in Mexico City in 1989, along with works from the *Genroku* series. Writing for the exhibition pamphlet, Juan Acha described how the "luminous, bold, and unique" background colors dominate and are complemented "by the vibrancy of floating conglomerates of multicolor graphics."⁴⁴ The *Sky* prints' "pure color and strong visual effects" have a graphic quality "for being able to be read succinctly and quickly, as are the messages of graphic design," Acha noted.

Between 1988 and 1992, he exhibited computer-generated works in groups shows at university art museums in Wisconsin and Oregon, at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, as close to home as Dallas, and as far away as Holland for the Second International Symposium on Electronic Art (SISEA).⁴⁵ He even co-curated an exhibition of computer-generated works, titled *Digital Visions*, at UTD's Visual Arts Gallery in 1991.⁴⁶

The SISEA catalog included statements from artists in the symposium's accompanying exhibition, including a statement from Sakai, which is the only first-person text I have found where the artist discusses his computer-generated works. His statement shows his passion for experimentation:

44 Juan Acha, "Kazuya Sakai: Entre el color manual y el computarizado" in pamphlet for the exhibition *Kazuya Sakai: Obra Reciente* at Galeria Juan Martin in Mexico City, August–September 1989. Mildred R. and Frederick M. Mayer Library artist file for Kazuya Sakai. Author's translation.

45 See *Computers and the Creative Process*, University of Oregon Museum of Art, 1989; Ted Pope, George Cramer, Patric D. Prince, *Crash: Computer Assisted Hard Copy* (Beloit: Beloit College Museums and University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989), 68–69; "At Harvard," *The Harvard Crimson*, March 12, 1992, www.thecrimson.com/article/1992/3/12/at-harvard-pbartb-pbgeological-architectureb-through-april/; and Thomas E. Linehan et al., *Digital image-digital cinema: SIGGRAPH '90 art show catalog* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1990). According to Wim van der Plas, ISEA co-founder and ISEA Symposium archivist, *SKY 15C* is included on a list of slides shown "via a stand-alone display" at the exhibition, and, because Sakai had an artist statement, his prints were likely on view as well.

46 Alfred T. Mitchell, UT Dallas Chronology Collection, February 13, 1991, utd-ir.tdl.org/handle/10735.1/4222

"I have been all my artistic life a painter using traditional media like oil, acrylic or watercolors. But when around 7 years ago I learned the possibilities to use computer in the image making, I thought I found a new way to visualize my ideas in a quite different manner. My interest in the potential of the computer is not to make another version of my painting, but rather to find out the possibilities to make an image which I could not make in any other way. Regardless of the complexity of a given system I may be using, my concern is not with the mimetic aspect of image making neither in the degree of sophistication of the system. We know that computer art is still in its infancy. The future of this art does not rest in replacing one medium for another, but to create a new genre with its own structure and aesthetic principles which are not subject to the traditional art."⁴⁷

After 1990, Sakai produced abstract works with even more direct allusions than before to Japanese artistic traditions, including a series of paintings titled *36 Views of Mount Fuji* and a group of *Kakemonos*, or hanging scrolls, that were exhibited at Galeria Juan Martin in 1993.⁴⁸

Sakai retired from UT Dallas in 1997; to celebrate his retirement, the School of Arts and Humanities hosted a concert of twentieth-century music.⁴⁹ The three-part program featured compositions by Alberto Ginastera, Toro Takemitsu, and Roberto Xavier Rodriguez, composers from Argentina, Japan, and Texas, respectively.

One of Sakai's last exhibitions during his lifetime opened on March 17, 2000 at the Dallas Visual Art Center, part of the *Mosaics* series of exhibitions that promoted "artists whose ethnicity is an essential element of their work."⁵⁰ A *Genroku* painting is depicted on one side of the invitation to the opening night reception, which included an artist talk.

Kazuya Sakai died in Dallas, Texas on August 27, 2001.⁵¹ Too many biographies of the artist jump from his career in Mexico to the year and place of his death. He is most celebrated in Mexico because his aesthetic phase during his residency there, and his impressive expertise in many fields, resonated profoundly with the local art scene. Still, that was only one portion of a long and dynamic career. More attention to the final decades of his life—spent in Texas following academic appointments—reveals late stages of evolution in his art, both taking inspiration from the past and testing the newest means of art-making, as well as the artist's pursuit, to the very end, of new methods for expressing a uniquely diverse artistic spirit. A

47 Materials from the Second International Symposium on Electronic Art, November 12-16, 1990, Groningen, Holland, ISEA Symposium Archives, accessed January 28, 2020 www.isea-archives.org/docs/1990/BofA/SISEA1990_Final_Prog_Book_of_Abstracts_Exhibition_Catalog.pdf.

48 Kana Takaki, "Kazuya Sakai and Latin American "New Art," (as in note 6), 247.

49 "A celebration of works by Kazuya Sakai 1980-1996" pamphlet from the University of Texas at Dallas. Blanton Museum of Art object file.

50 *Mosaics: Kazuya Sakai*. Postcard from the Dallas Visual Art Center mailed March 3, 2000, Blanton Museum of Art object file.

51 Daniel Garza Usabiaga, *Kazuya Sakai en México, 1965-1977*, 53.