A LONG ENGAGEMENT:

WENDY MARUYAMA AND HER STUDENTS

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY
Leadership Starts Here

School of ART + DESIGN

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Wendy Maruyama, Professor Emerita
Photo Credit: Kevin J. Miyazaki

School of ART + DESIGN

The Furniture Design and Woodworking program is part of the School of Art + Design at San Diego State University. It is one of the top furniture design and woodworking programs in the country and has a record of training accomplished artists, designers and makers. Additionally, many of our alumni have set up practices across the country and are making custom and production furniture projects of the highest quality. Many also hold teaching positions at the finest art and design programs in the country.

The Furniture Design and Woodworking curriculum puts equal focus on the art, design, and craft of furniture and material-driven sculptural objects. This allows for an incredible diversity of work to be produced by our students. I invite you to look through this catalog and see for yourself. I think you will see that our program's focus on helping students discover and develop their individual passion has led to some incredible work.

Matthew Hebert
Associate Professor - San Diego State University

MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES AND FINE ARTS

For more than 30 years Wendy Maruyama has created works that push the envelope, challenge perceptions, and introduce ideas that take direct aim at the status quo. When Wendy emerged on the furniture scene in the 1980s, she presented works in abstract form that used non-traditional materials and often included popular culture references. At the time, woodworking was a traditional field in which conventional reverence for wood was expected and adhered to by all in the field—and the field consisted primarily of men. Wendy was one of the first two women to enroll in an MFA program in furniture making in the United States.

When Wendy joined the faculty at San Diego State University in 1989, she brought with her a capacity to include all disciplines of the visual art world, and a work ethic second to none. Her expectations for herself and her students are often mentioned by her peers. Her students will tell you that she expected excellence of them, with feedback and criticism delivered in an honest and supportive manner.

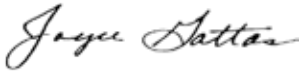
Wendy's commitment to her students is key to the stellar reputation of the SDSU Furniture Design and Woodworking Program. For 26 years Wendy never took "no" for an answer, and her tireless efforts to develop rigorous curriculum, better facilities, and secure funding for the program and her students are the cornerstone of her legacy. By developing a longstanding relationship with the Windgate Charitable Foundation, Wendy was instrumental in developing an endowed recruitment scholarship and the Windgate Artist-in-Residence program that enables an established artist to work alongside and mentor students each semester.

Today, the SDSU Furniture Design and Woodworking Program is part of a comprehensive arts program in applied design, grounded in the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art practice. It is a nationally recognized program with an impressive list of successful alumni well-known in studio furniture design, gallery ownership, and university faculty.

As the Dean of the College, and a friend of Wendy's, it is indeed a privilege to share with you the work in this catalog. Wendy's uncanny ability to connect with students and inspire their creative genius is on view here. While only 36 former students are highlighted, it is only due to time and resource constraints. I have no doubt you will be awed and inspired by the work of these artists.

Along with them, I am grateful to Wendy for her dedication to her craft, and to her students, all these many years.

Regards,



Joyce M. Gattas, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY
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EXPANDING THE FIELD

WENDY MARUYAMA AND AMERICAN STUDIO FURNITURE

BY HOLLY GORE

For three and a half decades, Wendy Maruyama has created works that explore and expand the possibilities of studio furniture. She was first exposed to woodworking during the 1970s, at Southwestern Junior College in Southern California, and cites Fantasy Furniture by Thomas Simpson as having stoked her enthusiasm for furniture design. Steeped in 1960s idealism, Simpson's book presents a freewheeling approach to craft that contrasts the conservatism Maruyama would encounter in the field of woodworking as she pursued a career as a designer-craftsperson. Then, the ethos of studio furniture demanded reverence for wood, and the exclusion of anything that could be considered popular, frivolous, processed or faux. Maruyama emerged in the 1980s as a maker of furniture whose abstract forms and painted surfaces were embedded with surprising and often humorous references to popular visual culture. Since the 2000s, she has expanded her practice, using furniture as an evocative element in works that lean towards conceptual sculpture, and employing craft as a means to political activism and community engagement.

One of Maruyama's best-known early works is Mickey Mackintosh (1981), a chair that challenges conventional hierarchies with brevity and wit (fig. 1). The piece has an elongated profile that references the lines of Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Arts and Crafts chair designs. Its backrest, however, is topped with a double circular cutout that is unmistakably a pair of oversized Mickey Mouse ears. Maruyama synthesizes this unlikely combination into a graceful silhouette, which is further unified by an all-over finish of dark gray paint flecked with white.
As the viewer recognizes and reads the motifs, s/he supplies the dissonant associations that make the piece funny. Thus, Mickey Mackintosh presents earthy Arts and Crafts and popular Disney as familiar features of a common cultural landscape, calling to question any assumption that the two belong to discrete, separate worlds.

In the environment where Mickey Mackintosh was made, the culture clash it presents resonated with debates over what kinds of new materials and designs were admissible in the tiny field of fine furniture. In the early 1980s, studio furniture was largely governed by the modernist idiom in which it had emerged in the years following the Second World War. The first generation of studio furniture makers, active during the 1950s through the 1970s, favored a spare approach to design and construction that banished nearly all traces of popular commercial culture. Traditional solid wood construction was the standard, and innovation often occurred in the contours of the works, where the influences of modern design and sculpture prevailed. Although this approach eschewed the weightiness and applied decoration characteristic of Arts and Crafts woodwork, its emphasis on natural finishes and hand-cut joinery extended the latter's code of "honest"

Fig. 1, *Mickey Mackintosh*, 1981, (polychromed wood)
Photo Credit: David Harrison

materials and reverence for pre-modern craft. In light of this ethos, Mickey Mackintosh, with its painted surface, popular imagery, and wry irreverence towards tradition, represents an outward push on the parameters of studio furniture. Seen in hindsight, the geometric forms, punchy colors, and playful attitude that characterize Maruyama's early furniture locate her squarely within the second generation of studio woodworkers. But at the outset of her career, the acceptance of such an aesthetic was far from inevitable. Whereas Maruyama's designs emerged from shapes, colors, and ideas, the prevailing philosophy in college woodworking programs maintained that creative freedom began with mastery of technique. For example, at the College of the Redwoods in Northern California, James Krenov assigned new students a project he called "the perfect board." Given a rough slab of wood, the student would shape its surfaces flat, parallel, and square using only hand tools. Next, s/he would cut the board crosswise on the bandsaw, leaving a pair of jagged edges. The final phase was to clean up the rough cuts—again using hand tools—and rejoin the two segments with a near invisible seam. Maruyama recalls that when she was in school, many East Coast institutions had a similar introductory project, in which students would create their perfectly planed boards, and then use them as a ground for cutting their first rows of dovetails.[1]

After completing her undergraduate studies in 1975, at San Diego State, Maruyama studied furniture making with Alphonse Mattia at Virginia Commonwealth University, and then with Mattia and Jere Osgood at the Program in Artisanry at Boston University. During this period she expanded her range of cabinetmaking techniques—learning dovetails, mortise and tenon, double tenon, and finger joints to name a few—while striving to create works that felt like her own. In developing her sense of design at the MFA program at the School for American Craftsmen at Rochester Institute of Technology, she looked to friends who were painters, printmakers, and ceramists. She recalls the expanded outlook this group brought to her practice:

> *They didn't think in terms of woodworking. So when I used to get feedback, it had nothing to do with joinery or thickness of material or types of wood, it was mostly about shapes and colors and forms. That was important to me. We just didn't talk about those kinds of things in furniture making at BU and RIT.*[2]

In taking an inclusive approach, Maruyama moved between disciplines that convention deemed separate. Just how rigid the boundaries she was crossing were is evident in a controversy that surrounded another one of her early works.

In 1980, while at RIT, Maruyama created Writing Desk (fig. 2). An asymmetrical assemblage of maple slabs, it is supported on one end by traditional tapered legs, and on the other, by two rectangular uprights. Maruyama joined the desktop to the uprights with

a series of through mortises, whose red-tipped ends create a colorful pattern on the blonde writing surface. Lastly, she scribbled her initials across the top in purple crayon, giving the work a graphic flourish that plays on the fact that the desk is for writing. This detail provoked the editors of the field's most prominent journal, Fine Woodworking, to pair Writing Desk with Garry Knox Bennett's Nail Cabinet on the back cover of the September-October 1980 issue in a pictorial entitled "Decoration vs. Desecration."[3]

Nail Cabinet (1979) is an elaborately constructed and highly polished Padauk display cabinet Bennett created as a statement against an emphasis on virtuosity in studio furniture that he perceived as the promotion of technique for technique's sake. Upon completing the work, he drove a nail into one of its door fronts, thus demonstrating that furniture can deliver a message, and that its content is not determined by skill alone. Maruyama, by contrast, asserts that with Writing Desk she had no confrontational or destructive intent, but was simply using the materials she saw fit to finish the piece. She comments, "To me, it wasn't any different than somebody applying a glaze to a ceramic pot or painting on fabric."[4] For her comparatively quiet approach to challenging the conventions of studio furniture, Maruyama has received less attention than the outspoken Bennett. Nevertheless she has played a significant role in defining the course of furniture design.

Besides having been instrumental in coaxing studio furniture towards a more inclusive aesthetic, Maruyama has

Fig. 2, *Writing Desk*, 1980, (maple, epoxy resins, crayon)
Photo Credit: Tennessee Tech University

Fig. 3, *King of the Monsters*, 2003, (polychromed wood, glass, stainless steel)
Photo Credit: Larry Stanley

moved the discipline away from monolithic masculinity. One of two women who were the first to enroll in an MFA program in furniture making in the United States, she is among the first to make a mark as a furniture maker. Some of what this shift has to offer is evident in a series entitled Turning Japanese (2003-2006), a body of conceptual works in which she explores her Japanese-American heritage, and in some instances, articulates female identity.

Turning Japanese takes its name from the chorus hook of a 1980s British pop song. The series comprises an assortment of furnishings—chests of drawers, display cases, mirrors, and a teahouse—that are suffused with references to Japanese culture. The latter appear in the design of the furniture, and in the items housed within. Some visual elements correlate with an American view on the East, such as a plastic Godzilla figurine, the painted likeness of Hello Kitty, woodblock prints, and door latches with round, decorative faceplates. Others, being more localized to Japan, may be less recognizable to viewers in the United States.

While in much of her furniture Maruyama forgoes conventional forms, in Turning Japanese she invites viewers to consider how commonplace domestic objects shape identity, for instance, the glass cases that are used to display Ningyo dolls. Popular as tourist souvenirs from Japan, Ningyo dolls depict women, often geishas, in traditional dress and hairstyle. King of the Monsters (2003) and Angry Asian Women (2003) are two works from Turning Japanese that incorporate typical Ningyo display boxes (fig. 3, 4). Each is a floor cabinet having a pair of doors embellished by round steel medallions, and each supports a glass doll box. In both, Maruyama upends the geisha ideal of woman as a servile beauty and provider of male pleasure by replacing the dolls with modern figures whose affect is fierce. In King of the

Monsters, she transforms the box into a diorama of Godzilla in the wild. In Angry Asian Women, the glass case contains two action figures with female torsos and menacing talons for hands and feet. This play on the notion of dangerous women is carried over into the lower cabinet, where it takes a sexual dimension. Centered on the face of each of the doors is a circular medallion that is laser-etched with the image of a geisha whose hand reaches inside her kimono.

In the case of the doll box, the unfamiliarity of the article invites viewers to look with fresh eyes at the ideals embedded within, and to extend this curiosity and acumen to everyday domestic objects. In her current work, Maruyama continues to widen the parameters of studio furniture through the expansion of her practice. In 2008, she embarked on an inquiry into an event in American history where, owing to a warped vision induced by racism and paranoia, people were categorized as things. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, an order for the mass deportation of all Japanese-Americans from the West Coast of the United States, which resulted in the removal of 120,000 residents of Washington, Oregon, California, and Colorado to internment camps. Photographer Dorothea Lange captured the inhumanity of the camp transports. Her images of families dressed and assembled for travel document the fact that every man, woman, and child had affixed to their person a government issued identification tag—the same tags used to mark their suitcases. Working from historic photographs, family history, and government documents, Maruyama created two related projects that confront this event: E.O. 9066, a series of wall-mounted dioramas similar in format to Turning Japanese, and the Tag Project, a radical departure from her previous works.

Fig. 4, *Angry Asian Women*, 2003, (polychromed wood, glass, stainless steel)
Photo Credit: Michael Slattery

Fig. 5, *Manzanar*, 2009, (wood, ink, wire, encaustic)
Photo Credit: David Harrison

In E. O. 9066 the function of a cabinet as a place to tuck things away becomes a metaphor for how histories may be suppressed. Manzanar (2009) is a diorama housed in an elongated cabinet whose horizontality evokes the barrenness of the desert where the Manzanar camp was located (fig. 5). The back wall of the box is printed with an image taken from one of Lange's photographs—the American flag flies against the majestic backdrop of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and over the Manzanar barracks. An added strand of real barbed wire punctuates the irony of the scene. The cabinet has two sliding doors, which depending on their position, may reveal isolated segments of the diorama, or hide its contents entirely. As such, Manzanar invokes the possibility histories kept private becoming fragmented or lost.

The Tag Project approaches the same history from another angle. Its material aspect consists of the recreations of 120,000 government identification tags worn by Japanese-Americans as they were evicted from their homes and moved to the camps—one for each person interned in 1942. The paper facsimiles are gathered by their strings, and suspended above in feathery masses (fig. 6). The spark for the project came from Maruyama's insight, while working on E.O. 9066, that "the tags were emblematic of the experience"[5] of Japanese-American internment. But the work is more than a memorial. To create the tags, Maruyama engaged hundreds of volunteers in the step-by-step process. Seated at communal work tables, church, school, and heritage groups found opportunity to discuss the direct legacy of Executive Order 9066, but also its implications for current issues such as immigration law and the treatment of Muslim-Americans in the wake of 9/11. Therefore, while the hanging bundles of handwritten names are reminders of so many untold stories, they are also the artifacts of a process of community awareness and engagement. As stand-ins for suppressed histories, Maruyama's tag sculptures have a place among works by contemporary artists such as Judy Chicago, Kara Walker, Fred Wilson, Zoe Leonard, and

Fig. 6, *The Tag Project*, 2012, (paper, ink, string)
Photo Credit: Kevin Miyazaki

Cheryl Dunye, whose works call attention to the missing accounts of persons who have been marginalized due to gender, race, religion, or economic status. But it also has implications within studio furniture.

In an environment where DIY and skilled craft are often characterized as mutually exclusive approaches, the combined display of E.O. 9066 and the Tag Project puts forth a scenario where we can have both. The tags engage the immediacy, populism, and upstart attitude associated with DIY, while wall dioramas shine as works of consummate craft.

Throughout her long career, Maruyama has continually created works that challenge conventional hierarchies. She does this not so much by overt declaration, but by offering the fruits of inclusiveness. In all her works, Maruyama allows contradictory elements to rest side by side, and in doing so draws attention to the significances we invest in cultural signs. As such, her works urge a reexamination of not only the design and craft of furniture, but of histories and identities as well.

[1] Janet Koplos, *Makers: a History of American Studio Craft* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 368-369.

[2] Wendy Maruyama interviewed in Johnson, Bebe Pritam, Warren Eames Johnson, Edward S. Cooke, and Roger Holmes, Speaking of Furniture: *Conversations with 14 American Masters* (New York: The Artist Book Foundation 2013), 221.

[3] "Decoration vs. Desecration" *Fine Woodworking*, September-October 1980.

[4] Wendy Maruyama interviewed in Johnson, *Speaking of Furniture*, 220.

[5] Wendy Maruyama, "The Tag Project: Rethinking the Artistic Process", December 14, 2013, http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/The-TAG-project-rethinking-the, accessed 18 August 2015.

ABOUT THE WRITER

HOLLY GORE

Holly Gore is a second-year doctoral student in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she specializes in modern and contemporary craft. Her research interests include twentieth-century American art, contemporary art, visual culture, craft histories, and museums. She is currently working on a minor in the history of American museums from the nineteenth century through the present. Prior to coming to UCSB, Holly earned a Master of Liberal Arts from Stanford University and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Cooper Union.

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Climbing Seats, 2015, (Ash, red oak, steel, rubber), 210” x 27” x 76”, Photo: Joshua Torbick

Acknowledgments by Matthew Hebert:

There are many people we would like to thank for their assistance with the exhibition and catalog. None of this would have been possible without the generous support of The John and Robyn Horn Foundation. Thanks to Professor Emiritus Wendy Maruyama for giving us an excuse to put together such an awesome show and catalog. Huge respect and gratitude goes out to all the SDSU alumni and current students who contributed their work, it is truly mind boggling how prolific and talented you are. Thanks to Dean Joyce Gattas for setting the stage so well with her foreword. Thanks to Professor Kotaro Nakamura for his support of the project through the entire process. The catalog would have been much less if it wasn’t for the thoughtful words of Holly Gore. The fun that was had at the opening reception was greatly increased by the support of the SDSU Art Council. Sophie Glenn (MFA, 2016) should be given a medal for her achievements as my right-hand-man on this project. Thank you to all who have contributed personal time and support to make this show a memorable one!

For information on supporting this important program, please call *619-594-4548*.

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