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Mariko Kusumoto: Unfolding Stories

October 24, 2010 – January 23, 2011

Mariko Kusumoto creates magical worlds that both delight and mystify. Using a variety of metalsmithing techniques, Kusumoto crafts elaborate miniature stage sets with multiple doors, moving parts, compartments and drawers as well as the characters and props to inhabit them. Her love of theater and performance is underscored by the potential interactive elements of each piece—they can be presented as closed boxes and containers or opened and manipulated so that their stories “unfold.” The narrative potential is even more complex as many elements are created in the form of brooches, necklaces and bracelets that can be worn and thus seen in a wholly different light.

These metal sculptural boxes, which also incorporate found objects, reflect Kusumoto’s Japanese identity and influences from her childhood.

Mariko Kusumoto has a M.F.A. in Printmaking from the Academy of Art College, San Francisco and a B.F.A. in Painting/Printmaking from the Musashino Art College, Tokyo, Japan. Her work has been included in several exhibitions and featured in numerous publications since the late 1990s.

Mariko Kusumoto: Unfolding Stories is organized by Mobilia Gallery, Cambridge, MA.

Of this exhibition, they write:

RAM will be the setting for her [Kusumoto’s] meticulously hand-crafted pieces using a variety of metalsmithing techniques: etching, enameling and casting. With each box sculpture, she presents a magical world of astounding detail and artistry.

A **New England Home Magazine** article written about Kusumoto recently reveals the artist’s early influences and artistic temperament:

Born into a priestly family and raised in a 400-year-old Buddhist temple in southern Japan, Kusumoto developed an affinity for metal early on. It was her household task to polish all the religious ornaments. The family was hardly poor, but her mother didn’t believe in toys for children. “I learned to make things up on my own,” she recalls. “I played with the stag beetles, the rocks. I remember using the gravestones as some sort of work table or cutting board.”

Her artistic talent showed early on. “I won all the drawing contests in school,” she says. “I couldn’t wait to leave for Tokyo to art college. I didn’t like having to say all the Buddhist prayers every night.” In Tokyo, she studied painting, but, she says, “It was a course in engraving that got me going. I’ve been working in metal ever since.”

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A recent statement by artist **Mariko Kusumoto**:

"Growing up in a 400-year-old temple, I was always surrounded by ancient things like tansu (Japanese chests of drawers), faded paint on wood, Buddhas and their ornaments, etc.

I was especially fascinated by the tansu. When I opened the drawers, I could never anticipate what would appear from the darkness. I had mixed feelings of excitement and fear whenever I opened it. It was a great wonder box to me. The darkness inside the tansu stirred up my imagination.

Inside the darkness of the temple, the gleam of the Buddhas and the golden ornaments would emerge. I could sense the spiritual world and its eternal silence. In my work, I am striving to create a world of shadows, light, silence, spirituality, and my personal memories."

Since Kusumoto's pieces are designed to be interactive, Mobilia Gallery has created stop-motion animation videos showing multiple aspects of her intricate stage sets. Presented in this gallery, these videos give a sense of how the objects can be pulled apart and rearranged. The videos are available on the internet at www.youtube.com by searching on **Mariko Kusumoto**. Some are also at Racine Art Museum's facebook page.

The artist's printmaking background reveals itself in her etching on metal and in her use of 2-d imagery that is layered and combined with 3-d elements. Kusumoto references art history and other images via decals that she applies to the metal surfaces. She also etches (designs, texts, and textures) into the metal and introduces found objects.

In addition, Kusumoto uses **electroforming**, which is a highly specialized process of metal part fabrication. Using a technique called **electrodeposition**, a metal skin is built up on a metal surface, or any surface that has been rendered electroconductive through the application of a paint that contains metal particles. Essentially, a new metal part is fabricated from the plating process itself. The base being electroformed can become a permanent part of the end product or can be temporary (as in the case of a wax base), and removed later, leaving only the new metal form, the **electroform** (tripleatlas.com).

Mariko Kusumoto and Bruce Metcalf (whose work is featured in RAM Gallery 3) both create miniature worlds. Each imbues their worlds with elements of their own lives—both particular and universal. Their work could be compared, in some respects, to the provocative and influential American artist Joseph Cornell, who is best known for his magical "boxes" created using found objects (also called assemblage).

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Other artists with backgrounds in metalsmithing, such as Richard Mawdsley, have been similarly interested in creating small worlds that can be a mixture of both fantasy and realism. All of these artists tap into a human fascination with miniature “stories”—from snow globes and dollhouses to miniature trains, architectural models and museum dioramas, such as the **Thorne Miniature Rooms** at the Art Institute of Chicago.