

american
craft

Outdoor
Sculpture
Built Not
To Last

Why
Art Critics
Should
Be Kinder

Sneak
Peek
St. Paul
Show

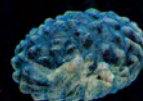
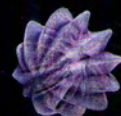
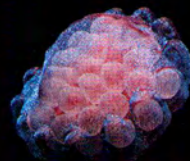
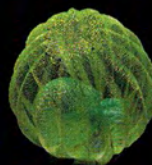
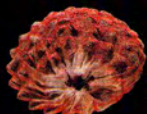
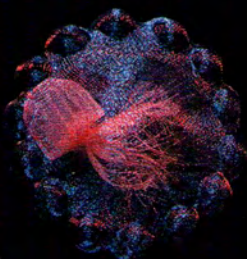
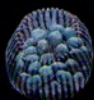
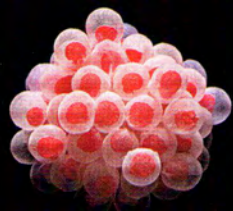
Enchanted by Nature



*How
artists like
Mariko
Kusumoto
open our
eyes to the
world*

americancraftmag.org

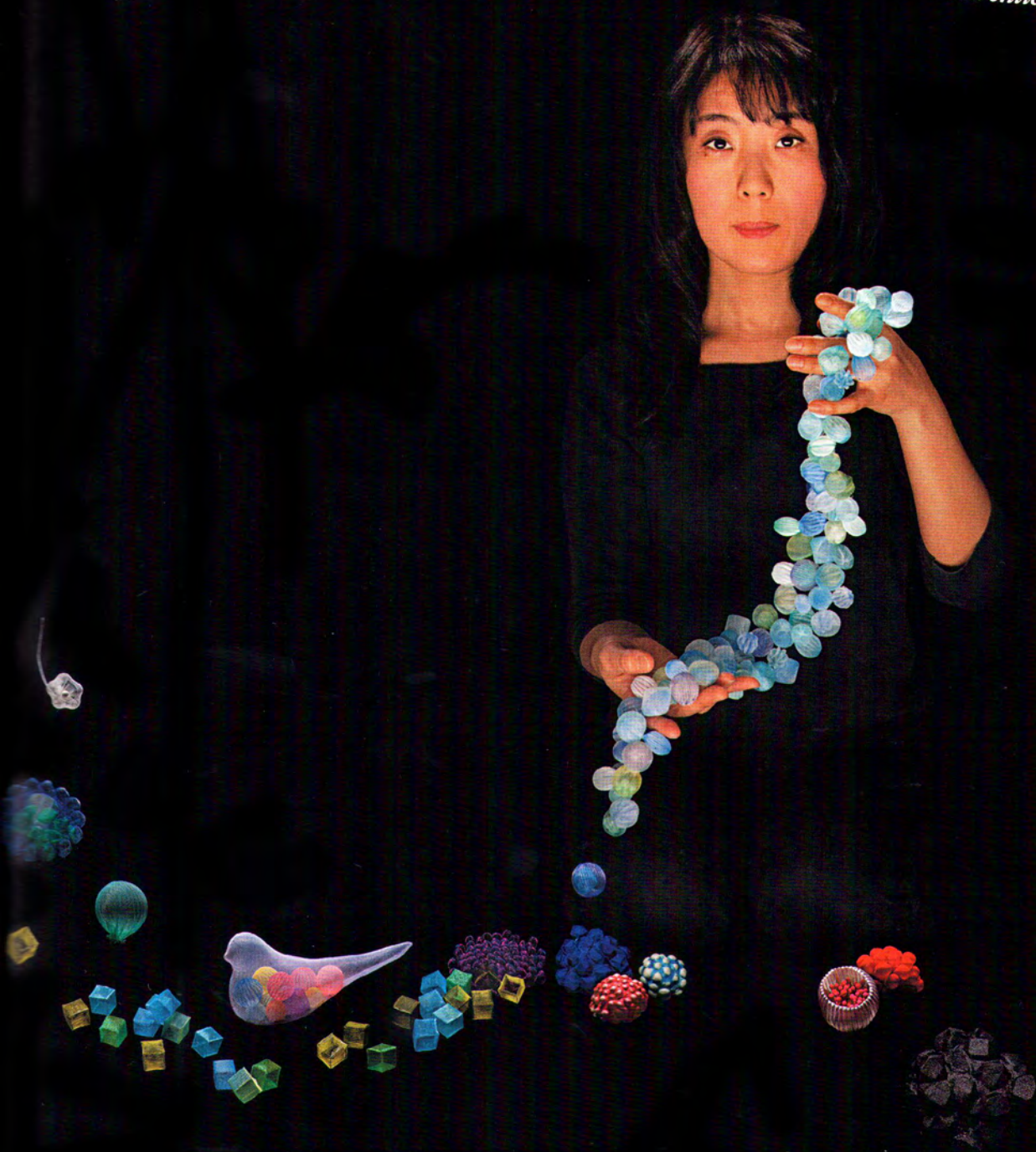
April / May 2015



STORY BY *Joyce Lovelace*
PORTRAIT BY *Cary and Babs Wolinsky*

Objects of Wonder

From fantastical metal sculptures to captivating fiber works, Mariko Kusumoto's artwork entices us to look closer.



Droplets, 2014,
polyester,
flower stamens,
4.5 in. dia.



MARIKO KUSUMOTO MAKES sculptures that have a quality of theater. She's not much of a moviegoer, though. So when the man came into the Marin County, California, gallery, wheeling a bicycle and sweating in cycling clothes, she thought he was the photographer arriving to shoot her pieces. "Look who's here!" said the gallery owner, greeting him. Kusumoto's American-born husband murmured to her in her native Japanese, "Do you know who this is?"

"I looked right at him," says Kusumoto, "and asked, 'Are you the photographer?'" That got a laugh from everyone, including the visitor, none other than the actor Robin Williams. He was humble and kind, she recalls, and a lot like his on-screen persona – animated, cracking jokes, talking in funny voices. As it turned out, he owned one of her sculptures. Called *Kisekae Dolls*, it consists of a

RIGHT:
Head, 2014,
polyester,
2.5 x 2 x 2 in.



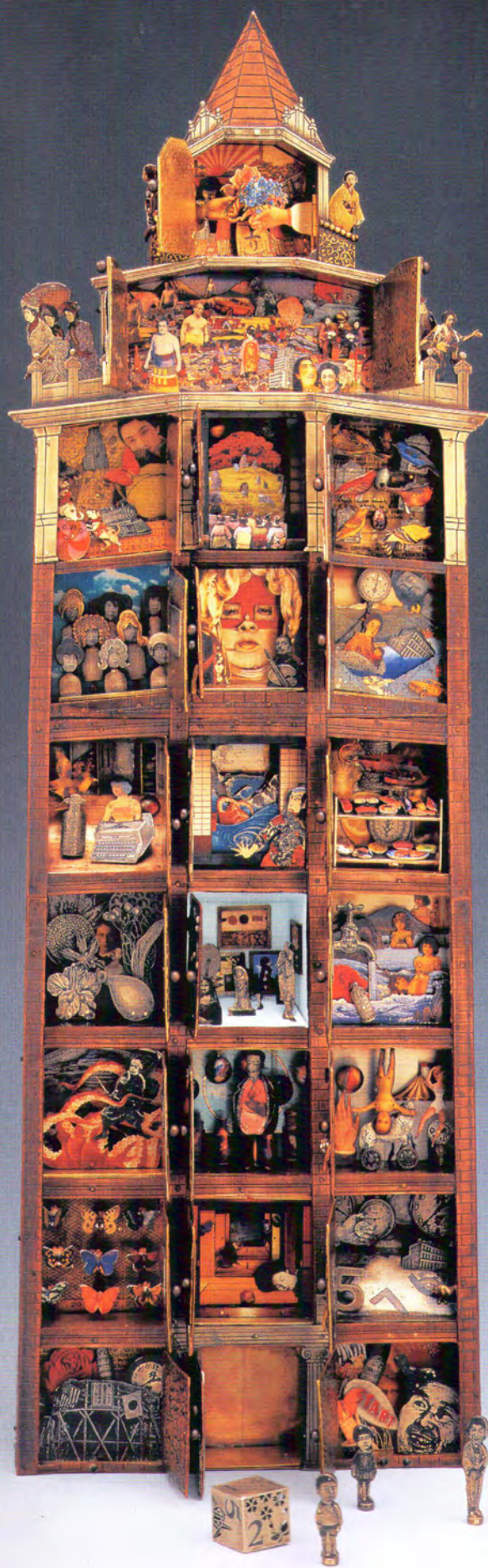
wooden display case housing a pair of metal dress-up figures, boy and girl, along with a wardrobe of tiny garments, masks, wigs, and accessories. The dolls can be costumed as different characters – old-world Japanese geisha or samurai, modern Western-style blondes, a bicultural mix – and worn as jewelry.

"My work is playful in some ways," Kusumoto says. "Maybe that's why he liked the piece."

Playful, changeable, eccentric – Kusumoto's art is all that and more, and one can easily imagine its appeal to a quirky genius like Williams. For 20 years the artist has worked mainly with metals – etched, carved, electroformed, and hammered copper, silver, brass, and nickel silver – combining them with decals and found objects to create intricate, tabletop-size sculptures. And lately she's been exploring a new medium, folding and molding fabric into enchanting



*Kusumoto's
fiber art
looks like
a departure –
but it shares
the whimsical
DNA of her
metal sculpture.*



Ryounkaku is both a vertical board game and an homage to a famous Tokyo department store tower destroyed in 1923 by an earthquake. The building was Japan's first Western-style skyscraper as well as home to its first elevator.

Ryounkaku, 2006, copper, brass, nickel silver, magnets, decals, 27 x 9 x 4 in. (open)

LEFT:
Kisekae Dolls is a riff on traditional Japanese dress-up figurines. The pair – shown here in two get-ups – have a wardrobe of tiny costumes and can also be worn as jewelry.

Kisekae Dolls (detail), 1998, copper, bronze, brass, sterling silver, nickel silver, wood, rice paper, coral, 4.25 in. high



wearable forms. At the heart of all of her work is wonder and discovery. "I've always enjoyed surprising people," she says.

Born in 1967, Kusumoto grew up in southern Japan, in a 400-year-old Buddhist temple where her father was the priest. She recalls the hushed serenity of the place, the dimness, the marks on the stone steps from centuries of raindrops from the roof. "I saw history everywhere throughout the temple. I liked the tranquility, that subtle light that creates a sort of spiritual world."

Metal was a familiar material to her. "One of my chores was polishing the metal ornaments. So I was always admiring these elaborately crafted pieces," she says. Though Kusumoto is not religious today, her artworks are, in a sense, expressions of the Buddhist teaching of impermanence:

They invite us to contemplate, in the moment, as their secrets and delights unfold.

She always wanted to be an artist, and majored in painting and printmaking at Musashino Art University in Tokyo. She remembers being attracted to the copper plates used for etching: "I liked the metal itself more than the images printed on paper." As a graduate student at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, she continued with printmaking but was never quite satisfied. Then, just before earning her MFA in 1995, she took a few classes in metal sculpture. "I decided, 'This is it.'"

Embracing metal as her medium, she developed her signature style early on – the house, box, or stage format, complex compartments filled with curiosities, a surreal aesthetic – and almost right away



M. Lee Fatherree, courtesy of Mobilia Gallery



*Kusumoto's
deft sculptures
invite us
to interact,
offering a
treasure hunt
of hidden
components.*

This tiny sushi shop is Kusumoto's favorite work to date. Each piece cracks open to reveal spectacularly detailed, surreal surprises – from a tiny Buddha to etched edamame beans.

Kaitenzushi,
2004, copper, brass,
sterling silver, nickel
silver, bronze, found
objects, acrylic paint,
enamel, 24k gold leaf,
13 x 12 x 12 in.



began exhibiting at the Susan Cummins Gallery in Mill Valley, California, a leading venue for contemporary art jewelry and metalwork. (It was there that Robin Williams purchased her piece.) Cummins closed shop in 2002, and Kusumoto joined with Mobilia Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2003, which has been her main dealer ever since. In 2005 she and her husband moved from San Francisco to the Boston area for their now-teenage daughter's education and to be close to the gallery.

Also, she says, "I missed the four seasons."

Kusumoto has always called on her Japanese identity in her artwork. She takes inspiration from childhood memories of her mother's *tansu* cabinets with their many little drawers, the promise of mystery and magic inside. She also admits to having a typically Japanese love for elaborate packaging: "When we give a gift, first there's the box, and then you open layer after layer. It's part of the fun." *Ryounkaku* (2006) is her tour-de-force reimagining of a

famous Tokyo department store tower built in 1890 and destroyed in an earthquake in 1923. (Her version functions as a vertical board game.) *Kaitenzushi* (2004), her favorite of all of her works to date, is a restaurant where a rotating tray serves sushi pieces that open up to contain – what? Little people eating sushi? A Buddha figurine? A baby adrift in a sea of octopus tentacles? The possibilities are as fantastical as they are exquisitely rendered. Having lived in the United States for two decades now,

Kusumoto also takes on Western culture in works such as *Bloomingdale's* (2007), her homage to another department store, this one quintessentially American. Other themes blend East and West, reflecting her assimilation to her adopted country.

Over time her work has grown more complex in technique and concept. In 2013 she finished what she considers her most ambitious piece, *Pachinko Voyage*, inspired by the Japanese pinball game. "It was difficult mechanically



Bird, 2014,
polyester,
2 x 4 x 1.5 in.

Inspired by an 1886 illustrated catalogue, *Bloomingdale's* opens like a book, each page re-creating a floor of the department store. Behind them all resides a tiny chest of drawers, home to a series of brooches with moving parts (opposite).

Bloomingdale's, 2007, nickel silver, sterling silver, brass, copper, decals, diamond, 7.5 x 8 x 6 in. (closed)



and visually, and took me a year to make. After that, I needed a break. I was so tired of using images. I wanted to do something more abstract, in a totally opposite material. So I chose fabric."

The result is her purely lovely new series of wearable pieces in a rainbow of colors, including delicate silk flowers she crafts using *tsumami zaiku* (a traditional origami-like folding technique) and ethereal, nature-inspired shapes, like seaforms or mushrooms, that she molds in synthetic fabric

via a heat-setting method. "It looks like a totally different artist," she says of this direction, and it's true, though her distinctive playfulness and attention to fine detail are still very much apparent.

This past fall and winter, a collection of these pieces was shown at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles, alongside fiber work by leading artists in the Textile Society of America's first juried exhibition (titled, appropriately enough, "New Directions"). Displayed together in glass

cases, Kusumoto's flowers and forms looked so charming, so utterly engaging, that you longed to reach through the glass and touch them. In fact, no matter the medium, she considers a work of hers complete only when someone interacts with it. "I want people to be involved with my work," she says. If the multiple components of her metal sculptures offer a but-wait-there's-more experience, her textile pieces, with their subtle shapes and joyful hues, evoke a feeling of but-wait-I-want-more.

So what entertainments does this ever-evolving artist have in store for us? For now, Kusumoto is reveling in the softness, translucency, and color spectrum of fabric. She'll return to metal eventually, she says, but in a fresh way that will likely involve her new passion.

"I want to utilize the character of fabric combined with metal, to create something never seen before."

+ mobilia-gallery.com
Joyce Lovelace is American Craft's contributing editor.

No matter the medium, Kusumoto's work is as exquisitely rendered as it is fantastical.

