

Worlds of Delight

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon

Robert Frost used to speak of a poem beginning in delight and ending in wisdom - he could have said the same of Mariko Kusumoto's magical metal sculptures and jewelry. Their initial delight lies in the thrill of surprise. Constructed as boxes, purses, teapots or other vessels, they open into layers of imagery juxtaposed with all the illogic of memory and associational organization of dreams. It is a kind of surrealism where the vision rhymes with the universe, so it is no wonder that the pieces sometimes make the artist herself laugh.

“The idea is really the most important aspect of my pieces,” Kusumoto says. “I want to create something unexpected and something I have never seen done before.” Although she uses Photoshop and paper maquettes to carefully plan each of her self-contained worlds, she says the pieces always change as she begins to execute her ideas in metal.

Kusumoto grew up in a 400-year-old Buddhist temple, and many of her works reference the traditional crafts of her native Japan, particularly the carefully worked exteriors of her boxes and vessels. Popular culture also plays a central role in much of her work. The box lunch of *Shizuoka Ekiben* (2006) is a witty riff on the green tea culture of that region and a delightful pun on the train station bento boxes that feature regional specialties. But, she says, “I like to keep going back and forth between Japanese and non-Japanese themes to keep my perception fresh.”

Bloomingdale's (2007) relies entirely on Western visuals. Kusumoto constructed the imagery from a Victorian-era catalog for the New York department store of the same title. She has also structured the piece in the manner of another Western device, the pop-up book, so that each story panel is hidden behind another. Kusumoto believes that the intent of the work should transcend the provenance of the imagery, though she notes that Victorian style from the West was very influential in her native Japan.

“I believe that whether the images are Japanese or not, some things such as humor, ideas, passion and feeling are universal and can be transmitted regardless of culture, language and race,” Kusumoto says.

The details of Kusumoto's work seem hauntingly familiar because she reprocesses public domain images into collage. She scans everything from classic Japanese woodblock prints to period advertising art. Then after manipulating the images in Photoshop, she prints onto decals that she can apply to her metal forms. The technique allows her to color the imagery with the subtle pastels of hand-tinted postcards and other printed materials created

before the age of color photography. The exquisitely detailed surfaces resonate with the tradition of photolithographic illustration used since the late nineteenth century to adorn metal toys—emphasizing the playfulness of the work.

The artist expects viewers to engage with her boxes and tableaux—even to play with them much as a child would play with a dollhouse and its furniture. *Kaiten Zushi* (2004) even requires two players: one as the sushi diner who places an order, and the other as the chef/server who loads up the bento boxes and rotates them back to the diner.

Interaction is the key to comprehension of Kusumoto's work. She creates the players and their stages, but every viewer arranges and re-arranges the parts to create a different narrative. The resolution of that story—what Frost would have called wisdom—is up to the viewer. Kusumoto only guarantees that the journey is a pure delight.

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