



## It's Not a Garden Table

Art and Design  
in the Expanded Field

63

Production

### Sitting on Ghosts – Mamiko Otsubo

The interview was conducted at Mamiko Otsubo's studio in New York City on June 28, 2009.

Mamiko Otsubo The title, *Sitting on Ghosts*,<sup>[→ p. XXV]</sup> actually comes from the Kartell tables used in the sculpture. The tables themselves are designed to be like ghosts of an actual table, kind of barely there, because they are made out of clear plastic. The sculpture started with this piece of walnut and I started to carve it. I arrived at a form, which I thought looked vaguely like a mountain. I often use abstract, iconic images of nature, not so much because I have a specific interest in nature *per se*, but mainly because I am interested in form. The relationship between form and image seems to be particularly fused there.

As I got further along in the piece, I realized that I was looking for a certain kind of precarious, uneasy balance between all the parts. In this piece, the arrangement of parts that are on top of the tables really came first. The material decisions for this piece were based on the fact that they were all materials a product designer would often use to design a piece of furniture or home decor products. The idea here was not to make a piece of furniture, but to make an arrangement of parts made with essentially the same technique and materials, but arrange them in a way that designers would never use. The viewer understands the vernacular of the materials, but the arrangement is meant to create a kind of discomfort, a question. A hand-blown glass globe, that is slightly too big, sits precariously on this piece of shaped walnut connected only by a single rubber plug. This whole arrangement sits on two bent pieces

of stainless steel with sharp edges, creating visible scratches against the soft plastic table. At the time, I was thinking quite a lot about the agency of an individual artist. I think the eyes of your average viewer, living amongst a world of perfectly mass-produced objects, are far more sophisticated about surfaces, finishes, and production than they consciously realize themselves. In the face of such unconscious internalized expectations, what are the options available to you as one artist working in a studio, with no real access to industrial technologies and tools? You compete more and more with product designers for space in people's homes and even in museums.

Burkhard Meltzer As an artist?

Mamiko Otsubo Yes, as a sculptor. People buy \$12,000 designer couches that they don't sit on, and coffee tables that they don't put their coffee cups on. These pieces of furniture are displayed in stores like sculpture, and really behave like that in people's homes when they are not used. And at the same time, I always envy designers for their access to tools and the sheer industry that is at their disposal to create these perfectly made things. I thought about the perfection of these injection molded Kartell tables and how that can only come from a factory. An individual artist cannot afford to do anything like this, but at the same time, we are competing for attention with objects that are so much more sophisticated. Maybe not in homes, necessarily, but in offices, in stores, and so on. I think the level of finish that is used is generally very high. And so when you get into that area with sculpture and finishing, you are really competing with certain kinds of expectations. These particular tables, they're about \$175 each.

They are actually not that expensive, and they are beautifully made, because they do them with these crazy machines. If I made them myself in Plexiglas, it would cost me literally twice the amount to make the same table and it would never look like this. I think the one true advantage that an artist has is to be able to claim things for their work.

Burkhard Meltzer Are you frequently looking at design?

Mamiko Otsubo I grew up around a lot of modern furniture. My parents also liked it. I see it fairly regularly now in New York. But I pay attention to and look at a lot of objects in general. All these objects in question really belong to a particular class of objects. I think design likes to think itself accessible and for consumption by a wider audience. Some are, I suppose. But in the middle and certainly higher end product design, the attitude doesn't seem that different from that of collecting art. I think as a class of objects, they all operate within the same social circle. But much of my current interest in these furniture pieces is really because they have started to behave like actual sculpture and are treated more and more like it. In a funny way, my use of an Eames chair base could be considered as a reverse tactic to get a sculpture in the house. If it was just a "plain" sculpture, maybe there would be some built-in resistance to the idea of "living" with a sculpture and it taking up some room in a home. If they look and behave as if they are, in part, furniture, there is an additional dialogue for the artwork, but it also takes advantage of its familiar vernacular as furniture.

Burkhard Meltzer I would be interested to know if you would still call the

Kartell table in your sculpture "furniture" or has it become something else for you?

Mamiko Otsubo I would call it "material." This is what I was referring to when I said earlier that the one true advantage an artist has is to be able to claim things for their artworks. I believe that an artist always has the right to claim things as material, whether that material be readymade, copyrighted, branded, new, old, historicized, etc. My work is often talked about in terms of Formalism, but I really feel this is a misreading. In Formalism there is a resistance to content, a kind of an effort to divorce form from content. My usage of material really resists that kind of complete erasure, and maintains interest in the little bits of information that you cannot separate from form or materials. I think more than Formalism, abstraction is a much bigger part of my work and the surroundings that have influenced me over the years. There's a lot of abstraction in Japanese environments (and in Japanese ways of thinking and communicating)—architecture, graphic design, textiles, symbols—it's really everywhere. And it's quite different from the way that it's treated here in the US. I think the Western conversation about abstraction is very limited to art, to painting and maybe certain types of sculpture. It often looks the same when people talk about it. There is not the same kind of investment in abstraction, like in the ways you might find in Japan. American ideas of space and abstraction are a totally different thing and really point to a different sensibility altogether.

Tido von Oppeln It's funny that when you talked about abstraction I immediately made the connection between modern design and abstrac-

tion, you could speak of abstract furniture. And historically, then, there are no roots in Western formal language for it, it comes from somewhere else. Leaving ornaments behind, but going on in formal development, but with no actual tradition for it.

Burkhard Meltzer So, if you use something as material in your work, it still remains the...

Mamiko Otsubo The "thing," right. I am very interested in the thing as it is, but also it serves me as material. In the artwork, the things display a kind of a double life. I pay quite a lot of attention to the surface of things, because there is something undivorceable there that maintains a connection with all the other things in the world. This is all part of the vernacular of materials, which is very important for me because that is one of the things that keeps an artwork from falling into an illusionary space. I am interested in an art that sits in the same space that you sit in, rather than somewhere else that's fictional.

Burkhard Meltzer So it seems a lot about balance between all those materials in your work rather than a competition.

Mamiko Otsubo I think the balance of the parts indicates to you the function. So the unusual balance of something indicates to you that it's not meant for the function that it looks like at first glance.

Burkhard Meltzer Were you ever approached by a person from the design field for a collaboration?

Mamiko Otsubo No, but I would totally love to do a collaboration. I always think that companies like Capellini or Vitra should have residencies

for artists. I would take that over any other art residency.