



'Untitled', 2012, Japanese cherry birch, 6.5 x 6.5 x 6.5 cm



'Untitled', 2012, Japanese cherry birch, diam. 8.5 x 9 cm

Biomimetic Explorations

THE ENIGMATIC SCULPTURES OF SATOSHI FUJINUMA

Satoshi Fujinuma is a natural surrealist, combining a fascination with creatures of the world with abstraction, while finding beauty in what most would find repulsive.

Profile by Kevin V. Wallace.

‘I have a strong interest in the natural world,’ says Satoshi Fujinuma. ‘I grew up playing in nature – bug catching, fishing, running around the fields covered in mud. I raised the insects and fish I caught with as much care as possible.’

Throughout his youth, Fujinuma preferred encyclopedias to novels. Attending university, he majored in environmental science, ultimately studying the movement of contaminants in the atmosphere by analyzing the chemical composition in raindrops. Upon graduation, he utilised

this research in various ways, from developing synthetic human bones to designing prototypes for auto engine parts. Holidays allowed time for him to visit national parks in New Zealand, the US and Canada where he still travels to seek out inspiration. His years at university, work experience and trips abroad have a cumulative influence on his work.

‘I’m not taken with beautiful scenery, but with the details I find in the natural world, Fujinuma says. ‘I’m overjoyed by finding something I have never seen before and the



'Untitled', 2012, Assamela, 9 x 16 x 8 cm



'Untitled', 2012, assamela, diam. 8 x 8 cm

resulting stimulation of intellectual desire. I roam around in nature seeking this sensation, employing all of my senses, to discover something unique. The natural world is filled with pattern and regularity, however there is some inconsistency and irregularity in creatures and objects which aren't beautiful in the accepted sense. The ones that often appear ugly and unpleasant looking to others are the very things that stimulate my senses. I ask, "What is that?" and "Why does it exist?" My art is born of these experiences. The sense of mystery and ambiguity in the sculptures of Satoshi Fujinuma bring to mind the mutating biomorphic



'Untitled', 2012, assamela, 7.5 x 13 x 7 cm

forms in Surrealist Yves Tanguy's paintings. Not only would Fujinuma's work fit comfortably alongside the works of the Surrealists, it represents something of an expansion of their approach to sculpture. Although the Surrealists largely focused on the exploration of automatic processes in writing, drawing, collage and painting, the 1920s and '30s saw the emergence and exploration of the Surrealist object. In an attempt to engage directly with the material world, the Surrealist object could, it was felt, represent life. Salvador Dali inspired a number of artists to create Surrealist objects, often constructed to create jarring juxtapositions



'Untitled', 2011, Japanese clethra, diam. 7.5 x 11.5 cm



'Untitled', 2011, Japanese clethra, diam. 7.5 x 11.5 cm



'Untitled', 2012, assamela, 9x 16 x 8 cm

positions out of pre-existing and outmoded commodities. While these works for the most part represented modern life and functioned as a critique of consumer culture, they also allowed for the wider assimilation of Surrealist ideas. Their fascination with nature paved the way for an exploration of forms and motifs from disparate sources, from natural science to Art Nouveau and Art Deco design, and the resulting biomorphism provided an organic form language for many artists in the late 1940s and early '50s. This biomorphism spread into wide-ranging applications of art and design in the West and garnered a whole range of new meanings.

Fujinuma's work is both an extension of these currents in art and design and a reinvention of them. His experience as an environmental scientist also makes clear his understanding of biomimicry, bionics and biomimetics. Rather than looking to nature aesthetically, these fields represent an attempt to mimic nature for the purpose of function. For example, in attempting to create manmade flying machines, both Leonardo da Vinci and the Wright brothers studied the way birds fly. Scientists and inventors continue to examine nature for engineering ideas and this has led to a multitude of products that imitate nature. Satoshi Fujinuma refers to his work as biomimetic and he strives to make something which could "believably" exist – what might be referred to as realistic abstract art.

'I'm happy when the viewer feels as though my art could exist in nature – or better yet, if they think they have seen it somewhere before,' he says.

Fujinuma initially worked with ceramics, but didn't agree with the way Japanese crafts were valued. He believes the study of environmental science is a much greater influence than historical approaches to the arts or craft.

Ever since he started woodturning, Fujinuma knew that he wanted to become an artist – but never a craftsman as implied in normal usage. The international wood artists that he has come to know have influenced him with their culture, thoughts, lifestyle and techniques, yet he has developed a distinct body of work by not being influenced by the arts.

'In 1993, I saw examples of contemporary woodturning



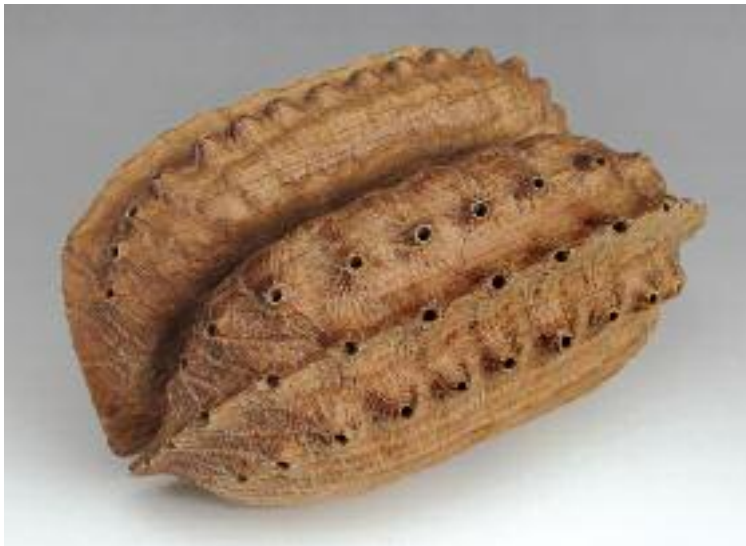
'Untitled', 2009, cherry, 15 x 9 x 7.5 cm



'Untitled', 2012, assamela, 6.5 x 12 x 7 cm



'Untitled', 2012, Japanese oak, 13 x 9 x 9 cm



'Untitled', 2012, Japanese oak, 7.5 x 15 x 10 cm



'Untitled', 2012, Japanese oak, 7.5 x 15 x 10 cm

by chance while travelling in New Zealand and it made an impression on me,' Fujinuma recalls. 'During the visit, many people I met said, "We live in New Zealand because we fell in love with this place", and that touched me. In Japan, your job comes first and then you decide where you need to live for that job. You then live the lifestyle that your job allows you to live. I started woodturning in order to be independent from that kind of society.'

In 1996, Fujinuma began educating himself in woodturning, as there was very little if any information available in Japan. His sister was living in Kentucky and sent him a copy of *American Woodturner*, the journal published by the American Association of Woodturners. He joined the AAW immediately.

In 1998, Fujinuma's works were selected for inclusion in the AAW's "Pathways" exhibition and he travelled to the US to attend his first woodturning symposium. 'I was surprised by how large the symposium was and how many woodturners existed,' he recalls. 'At the time I was making functional objects, like bowls or goblets, and found the sculptural pieces in the Pathways show most impressive. The experience was eye-opening and I realised that the field of woodturning offered tremendous freedom.'

At the symposium, Fujinuma was introduced to Albert LeCoff, Co-founder and Director of The Center for Art in Wood, though it took a few years before LeCoff began to take an interest in his work.

'Satoshi Fujinuma's exquisite work first came to my attention in 2001 when he applied for entry into the Center's "Challenge VI: Roots – Insights & Inspirations in Contemporary Turned Objects" exhibition,' LeCoff recalls. 'His simple white sculpture, lifted off a textured base, was a remarkable stand out from the other conventional wood turnings submitted to the call for work. This piece is now part of the Center's permanent collection.'

In 2008, Fujinuma was a Fellow in the Center for Art in Wood's International Turning Exchange (ITE) Residency held in Philadelphia. He produced a fresh, intricate body of work which collectors immediately purchased. He is now a regular participant in wood art events throughout the US, including at the Center for Art in Wood.



'Untitled' (detail), 2012, Japanese clethra, diam. 6 x 18.5 cm

'In the Center's recent "Life Aquatic" exhibition, Satoshi created diverse artworks, inspired by marine life', says LeCoff. 'Next, Satoshi will participate in the Center's "Challenge VIII: Bartram's Boxes Remix" international exhibition inspired by explorations of nature at Bartram's Garden in Philadelphia. His talents and sense of humour are a splendid addition to the international network of artists who work in wood.'

In the US, Satoshi Fujinuma's work has come to be viewed within the context of contemporary wood art or woodturning and his work is often juxtaposed with other artists in these fields. In Japan, he is viewed quite differently.

'The big difference is the way people define woodturning,' Fujinuma notes. 'In Japan, the process is utilised to create functional objects, such as bowls and dishes. There is no one that I know of in Japan who utilises the process of woodturning to create sculpture. For this reason, I am not recognised as a woodturner in Japan – I am an artist creating sculpture out of wood. When I explain to them that I use the process of woodturning to create my art, they are very surprised, as it is unheard of in Japan.'

Fujinuma's inclusion in "Kowaku Volume 3 – Koh-jutsu", a recent exhibition at Spiral Garden in Tokyo, makes clear that challenging definitions of craft and art is as important in Japan as in the Western world.

Koh-jutsu translates roughly as skillful technique in Japanese and the Koh-jutsu exhibitions are meant to indicate the essence and future image of Japanese art. The series has been introducing artworks comprising delicate skillfulness and powerful techniques that unveil the practices conducted by Japanese artists and characteristics of the Japanese. The third annual presentation of the exhibition had the additional theme of *Kowaku*, which concerns fascination. The works in the exhibition provide a chance to recollect and review the meaning and concept of the term *Koh-jutsu* and its connection to *Kowaku*.

Art history in Japan is composed of craft descended from ancient times, art history artificially built in the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century, and contemporary art compulsively imported to Japan. It can be described as peculiar because each of those categories develops in



'Untitled' (detail), 2012, Japanese clethra, diam. 6 x 18.5 cm



'Untitled', 2011, Japanese oak, diam. 7.5 x 4 cm



'Untitled', 2010, oak, 7.5 x 11.5 x 7.5 cm

parallel, and meanwhile imposes impact on each other. As for now, owing to the rapid economic growth in Asia, contemporary art is likely to have become a target of consumption and opportunism before its essential value is commonly recognised. Koh-jutsu was conceived as a response to such instability and sense of crisis concerning Japanese contemporary art.

Throughout history, Japanese art featuring physical delicacy and skill was easily classified as craft rather than art. If judged by Western aesthetic values, such art does not



'Untitled', 2012, Japanese mulberry, 4.5 x 7.5 x 6.5 cm

rise to the mantle of Art Fair artistic rating. The Koh-jutsu exhibitions explore what Japanese art could be by eliminating foreign perspectives like exoticism and Japonism, so that skillful technique in craftsmanship can be viewed as fine art. Celebrating elevation in technique allows artists to pursue self-improvement that can be considered as a spiritual practice; a philosophy that runs through all Japanese culture. By raising the concept and introducing artists whose presentations are a real practice of *Koh-jutsu*, the series of exhibitions aim to create new ways of revaluing Japanese art and identity.

One of the things that sets the work of Fujinuma apart from his contemporaries is his preference for making works in a smaller scale. While many sculptors seek attention by creating monumental works, Fujinuma prefers to have his the viewer interact with his work in a different way.

'From the time I began creating bio-mimic works in wood, they were smaller in scale,' he says. 'I am fascinated by the detailed structures, patterns and texture that exist in creatures and nature, and somehow my fascination is with smaller creatures. I imagine if I made my visions in larger scale, they might be seen as grotesque or frightening.'

He enjoys observing the viewer's reaction to his work and, when possible, likes for them to take advantage of the work's smaller scale and pick them up to examine them more closely and from different perspectives.

'Most of Fujinuma's works fit perfectly in the palm of your hand, the better to closely examine the organic designs and complex textures,' Albert LeCoff notes. 'They recall all the intricacies of netsukes – but at hand-scale.'

'Every time I come across something that interests me, I pick it up and study it,' says Fujinuma. 'I want the viewer to experience my art in the same way. There is so much you can't see in a photograph and I like the idea of people picking up the work and examining it in an intimate and tactile manner.'

As an artist working in a media closely related to craft traditions, Fujinuma's relationship with the worlds of art and craft is very unusual, yet he remains highly inspired and motivated to create. 'In utilising the lathe, a machine that revolves at high speeds, to create my work, I see a relationship with nature,' says Satoshi Fujinuma. 'For me rotation resembles the natural world – a continuous never-ending motion without interruption, like the rotation of our planet spinning in space.'

Kevin V. Wallace

Kevin V. Wallace is Director of the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts and Happy Valley Cultural Center, California.



'Untitled', 2012, cherry, 7.5 x 13 x 9 cm



'Untitled', 2012, black walnut, diam. 11 x 4.5 cm