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Kumi Yamashita was born in Japan, just outside of Tokyo and lived there until she came to the States as a high school exchange student. Her mother studied fashion and would design and make clothes for her and her two sisters when they were growing up. Her father was a sculptor and also a professor of industrial design who had strong interests in traditional Japanese crafts. He could draw very well and when he explained things to her and her two sisters he would take pencil and paper and make simple but beautiful drawings. They both affected her because ever since

she was little she was euphoric as long as she was left alone to draw or make something. In fact, her father named her Kumi, which uses two Chinese characters: the first character '工' translates as "to make or create" and the second character '美' translates as "beauty". "So maybe my dad jinxed me! I was very fortunate in that my parents never once questioned the direction I chose to continue making 'impractical' things. Instead, they gave me all the support a child could ask for." She never consciously made a decision to become an artist, she just continued doing what

she most enjoyed. She first came to the States as a high school exchange student, spending a year in Indiana and then another year in upstate New York. After graduation, she went to Florence and studied for two years before returning to the U.S. to receive her BFA from Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. I then went to Glasgow School of Art for my MFA.

"If anything contributes to my art, I imagine it is this exposure to various people and cultures. If one looks at my body of work, an interest in the human figure, in the human face, is apparent. And perhaps this has to do with my meeting so many interesting and different people outside my culture."

IV.

LIGHT & SHADOW

"Shadows came to symbolize another dimension of life, perhaps something even more real than its holder."

Kumi was attracted to working with light and the manipulation of it to form shadows because she loves admiring and analysing the interactions between lights and shadows.

She remembers sitting on the patio of her family home in the late autumn afternoon. The sun was setting and was casting the shadow of swaying branches of our fragrant olive tree on the ground. The color of the light was gradually changing from warm orange to cool blue as the shadow of the tree stretched and faded away.

In her young mind she questioned the permanence and ephemera of all living things as the tree stood soundly in front of her in the almost monochromatic landscape. For her, shadows came to symbolize another dimension of life, perhaps something even more real than its holder.

FRAGMENTS

CAST RESIN, SINGLE LIGHT
SOURCE, SHADOW

FRAGMENTS
2009
H270, W400, D2 cm
Cast resin, single light
source, shadow.
Permanent Collection
New Mexico History
Museum, Santa Fe



110

LIGHT AND SHADOW

Fragments is a piece which was commissioned by the new mexico history museum in Santa Fe. Kumi wanted to make 40 colorful resin tiles that cast 40 silhouette profiles of New Mexico residents of different backgrounds and ethnicities, people she met while traveling in 2008. For one week, she drove around the state meeting and talking to people, hearing their stories, and photographing their profiles. Some had just moved to New Mexico and were starting their new life, while others came from families that had been there for centuries.

“When I look at fragments, I see all the diverse and wonderful people who paused for me and gave me the time to share in their story.”

It is both testament and celebration of the people whose names may never make it into the history books or history museums, but who definitely make up the rich fabric of life in a pueblo, city, county, and state.



111

0 TO 9

CARVED WOOD, SINGLE LIGHT
SOURCE, SHADOW

Interestingly, toy-like numbers to cast shadows and the puppetry this evokes, masks the extreme spatial complexity involved in the successful and convincing formation of the shadow. When it comes to the numbers, letters and building blocks that she uses in her Light & Shadow work, those have all been hand made by her. Sometimes she even has to create her own font so that she can get the organic shape she needs for the specific work.

“While they may look mass-produced, they are all individually unique so as to fulfill their specific function.”

0 to 9
2011
H183, W183, D10 cm
Carved wood, single
light source, shadow
Permanent Collection
Le Meridien Shenyang





CHAIR
2014
H110 W50 D15 cm
Carved wood, single
light source, shadow
Private collection

CHAIR

CARVED WOOD, SINGLE LIGHT
SOURCE, SHADOW

Kumi is best known for her light and shadow sculptures constructed from everyday objects. She first starts with photographing real models to begin understanding the different poses she works with. She expresses the importance of shadow manipulation and outline. The next steps into her work then is to sketch the composition out and develop the sense of space since placement is integral in each piece.

She sculpts shadows using light or sometimes light with shadow, but both function in essentially the same manner. Kumi constructs single or multiple objects and places them in relation to a single light source.

“The complete artwork is comprised of both the material and the immaterial.”

A lot of the work that she has created begins visually. She will see an image of the work almost fully formed in my mind’s eye, as opposed to working out an idea or concept. If the image sticks with her for a few days and continues

to excite her, she’ll have the desire to attempt to make it. Kumi then has to figure out how. With work such as her light and shadow sculptures, this may mean weeks or months of in-studio trial and error until I either succeed or realize it is not possible and move on.



MOTHER

CARVED WOOD, SINGLE LIGHT
SOURCE, SHADOW



MOTHER
2007
H73, W43 cm
Fabric with
fthreads removed
Private Collection

The biggest influence in Kumi's work is simply having been born and raised in Japan. Visually, the Japanese aesthetic of reducing things to their essence such as is found in haiku poetry or ikebana or zen gardens, along with the expert craftsmanship exhibited by Japanese artisans, has definitely informed her work. Intellectually, she's been shaped by living in a country where she saw the curious coexistence of two opposing ideologies: the embracing temperament of Buddhism/Shintoism spirituality versus an alienating homogeneous mentality. She has always longed for a land that embraced all humanity and ideologies. She says that is the reason why she was drawn to the show *Sesame Street* and why she decided to come to America at a young age.

MANA N°2

WOOD PANEL, BRADS,
SINGLE SEWING THREAD

Mana n°2 is another portrait from from "Constellation" series. The highly intricate multidimensional textures of the composition brings out a realistic and almost organic quality to the face.

She created this portrait of her niece Mana from a photo taken at a young age of her as she is about to blow out the candles on her birthday cake, so it has a really beautiful quality of light.

"She is about to blow out the candles on her birthday cake, so it has a really beautiful quality of light."

What compels Kumi to create art-works really comes down to a couple of things on the most basic level. The first is that she feels the most fulfilled when she is involved in the act of making something. Kumi really enjoys using her hands and to be in her studio working just makes her feel good. She also has a desire to connect, to communicate and share with others her thoughts or feelings. Making art allows her to do that and also opens up channels for wonderful interactions and experiences with others.

MANA no.2
2013
H39, W30.5, D3 cm
Wood panel, brads,
single sewing thread
Private collection

