



HERE: Samples of Kusumoto's latest work, inspired by sea life, origami, and *Tsumami Zaiku*, the hair ornaments worn by Japanese women in kimono. **Brooches**; 2013; polyester, silk, sterling silver; heat-setting; 3 x 3.5 in. RIGHT: An inspiration page from the artist's sketchbook.

Exploring WEIGHTLESSNESS

BY **MARCIA YOUNG**
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Mariko Kusumoto is a self-described metalsmith, and the bulk of her work is in creating metal sculptures, each one a treasure box of unique images, containers, and specimens. But her newest gossamer work in fibers is surprising everyone, including herself.

I first met up with Kusumoto last fall and was inspired by this metal sculptor's experimentation in fibers. None of her new work had been shown before, and much of it was still in the construction phase. With all the materials, process, and design experimentation she was doing, I suspected that the work was going to be sincere and fresh. I arranged to visit her studio this spring as she prepared for the opening of her first fiber show, *Translucent Explorations*, at Mobilia Gallery, where she mounted fabric flower blossoms on the walls, making the expansive surface her canvas. Light boxes were used to convey the luminescence and mystery of the work.

We started our visit with a tour of her metals studio. The time spent there informed her new work, and was rich with images and ideas, and introduced us to Kusumoto's unique sensibility and technical skills.

Amongst metal etchings, compressors, resins, metal cutting tools, and molds, the shelves were brimming and walls awash with treasures found at auctions and flea markets, both in the United States and Japan. She is a collector of small trinkets, toys, and images. One can't help but get lost in these simple





ABOVE & BELOW: Three rings inspired by sea life. Made of sterling silver, polyester, and other materials, heat set into shape.
 OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT: Mock-ups for Kusumoto's sculptural jewelry. TOP RIGHT: Origami fabric bracelet, heat set into shape and shibori-tipped on hill folds.
 BOTTOM: Kusumoto's studio.



joys of life! Her studio was a grown up *Dagashiya*, a Japanese shop found along busy streets, that are magical, colorful places for kids to buy sweets, penny candies, games, and small toys.

Regardless of the medium, Kusumoto's education and childhood directly inform her identity and creative direction. She is a printmaker by education, with a degree in painting and printmaking from Musashino Art College in Japan and an MFA in printmaking from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. Her father was a Buddhist priest, which means that she grew up living at a temple on the island of Kyushu, in Japan. "Koueiji temple is over 400 years old, and I treasure the time spent playing on the grounds and finding pieces of relics, such as shards of ceramics and parts of tools that had been buried for many, many years. Since my father passed away, my brother is now the priest at Koueiji, continuing our family's legacy."

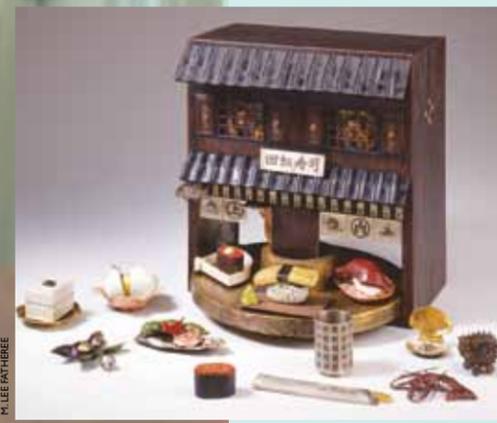
Much of the imagery used in her sculptures is taken from collages that she creates from various sources, the colors pumped up and saturated, much like the painted photos of Japan's Meiji period (1868-1912). Charmingly sincere and kitsch, her choice of imagery offers a window into a simpler time, free of irony and sarcasm. Her sculptures are irresistible, each one able to be unpacked, components opened, and treasures discovered and manipulated. Within the context of her metal work, the themes she explores keep changing, such as pop-up books, pachinko, games design, and circus performance.

Kaiten Zushi typifies Kusumoto's sculptural metalwork, offering up to the viewer pieces of sushi that are served via a movable sushi bar. The viewer chooses one, then begins to open up the treasure it holds. According to Kusumoto, "Each item reveals a scene or hidden object so that with each piece of sushi, the viewer experiences the anticipation at what they might discover next. For example, when the *tobiko* is opened, one finds figures enjoying miniature pieces of my favorite sushi."





ABOVE: Kusumoto's studio. HERE: Kusumoto arranges *Tsumami Zaiku* pieces. TOP RIGHT: **Kaiten Zushi**; 2004; copper, brass, sterling silver, nickel silver, bronze, found objects, acrylic paint, enamel, 24k gold leaf; 13 x 12 in. BELOW RIGHT: The 400-year-old Koueiji Temple in Kyushu, Japan where Mariko's father was a priest. She was raised there and spent much of her childhood wandering the temple grounds and garden.



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The next step in our visit was to get acquainted with the new fiber work. She had spent the months since our last meeting in a daily trial and error session, experimenting extensively with polyester, silk, wire, stamens, and sterling silver to create a new body of work. Unlike her solid, weighty metalwork with intricate hinges and working parts, the fiber pieces are delicate and understated, often enhanced with suspended inner treasures, real or imagined. She made contemporary interpretations of the Japanese *Tsumami Zaiku*, the hair ornaments worn by women in traditional kimono; innovative pieces made with complex origami forms; and jewelry inspired by sea life. Her recent experiments have resulted in a host of floating, weightless, fascinating pieces.

The *Tsumami Zaiku* collection is exquisite. She is now working on assembling them into wearable art that can be displayed in the home as sculpture when not being worn. She has created a collection of over 50 pieces, based on these traditional Japanese forms.

The origami pieces are fluid and changing, offering a new shape and color when stretched to be worn on the wrist. She designed the origami pattern herself, folded and secured the fabric into its new, permanent shape, and added shibori dyeing techniques, tipping blue on the edges of each hill fold.

The third group, jewelry inspired by sea life, is made from polyester and other fabrics that have been heat-set into a permanent shape. Each piece is luminous and multilayered and brings to mind *wagasbi*, the exquisitely crafted sweets that one savors during Japanese tea ceremony. As different as Kusumoto's new work is from the sculptures that she has been making for years, the common core still exists, which is that the work evokes wonder, begging to be touched and explored.

Translucent Explorations opened at Mobilia Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts on May 1 and will run through June 30. Visit www.mobilia-gallery.com for details.

See the rest of our photo shoot at Kusumoto's studio by browsing the photo gallery at www.fiberartnow.net.

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