

## Weightless: The comparative practices of Jiro Takamatsu and Shiro Kuramata

by Oscar Humphries

We are all products of our time but Jiro Takamatsu (1936-1998) and Shiro Kuramata (1934-1991), through their varied efforts in the fields of, respectively: art, design and architecture, came to define their era, bringing a strikingly original and uniquely Japanese language of post-modernism to a local and global audience. Nearly exact contemporaries, they grew up in the post-war boom that followed the Second World War and preceded Tokyo's resurrective induction into a new era of modernism that was the 1962 Olympic Games. It was in those post-war years that Japan, a culture that had traditionally given the past and its strict aesthetic rules and prescriptive stylistic templates primacy over the present, began to look forward. This imagined future must have looked frighteningly American. Junichiro Tanizaki's essay 'In Praise of Shadows' first appeared in 1933 and this treatise on Japanese aesthetics created a profound resonance on its publication and left its mark on both Kuramata and Takamatsu. Indeed, this book continues to influence artists, designers and others. While it deals with a specifically Japanese way of looking at the world and shaping space, such is the obvious beauty and authenticity of the ancient design principles it sets out that they appeal to a wider international audience. Good design is obviously such, regardless of the position, locale or epoch from which one encounters it. Charles Moore, in his 1977 foreword to the first English-language publication, quotes the architect Louis Kahn, "the sun never knew how wonderful it was until it fell on the wall of a building", the idea that light should play such an essential role in design or art is obvious in the works of both Takamatsu and Kuramata. The sun, or at least light, is the invisible subject in seminal works by both artist and designer. It is material as well as subject, for whilst ethereal unlike paint or Perspex, it is the genesis that brings these works to life. 'In Praise of Shadows' dwells on the subtlety that can arise in the space where light or dark meets object, person, or building. It is in the chiaroscuro of the 1950s when Japan was ambiguously both modern and not modern that the two subjects of this essay undertook their training and apprenticeships, both germinating talents that would bear remarkable and strange fruit in the subsequent decades.

Shiro Kuramata studied wood-making at school, trained as an architect, and worked first in a furniture factory before going on to design retail spaces and windows for department stores opening his own design studio in 1965. As we know, Kuramata would later achieve greatness and now sits within the top tier of architect designers becoming, surely, Japan's most famous late twentieth century designer. He collaborated from the late 1970s until 1990 with the fashion designer



Shiro Kuramata with Dinah 1970

Courtesy of Kuramata Design Office  
Photograph by Takayuki Ogawa

Issey Miyake creating stores, packaging and products born out of a friendship that both men treasured. Friendship was important to Kuramata and it is his intimacy with Ettore Sottsass and the wider Memphis Group that brought an imagination that might have been confined to a niche avant-garde to a large audience. Kuramata met Sottsass in 1980 and their working relationship continued until Kuramata's death. So happy was Kuramata when he was first contacted by Sottsass that he said "I got a love letter from Sottsass". Sottsass had enormous respect, admiration and affection for his Japanese colleague saying shortly after the latter's death, "I thought Kuramata was someone special. It was like lovers from Brazil and New Guinea. Have you ever fallen in love? It is similar to that feeling." Kuramata collaborated with Vitra and Cappellini also, but it is his limited edition pieces that most obviously embody the magic that makes his poetry of form so compelling. Just as Jean Prouve is the master of aluminium, Charlotte Perriand of wood, it is Kuramata who took Perspex to its zenith.

His 'Glass Chair' from 1976 prefigures the later Perspex pieces for which he is most famous. The chair consists of six plates of glass joined together seemingly invisibly, in fact the entire object depending on how it is lit, seems to fade between visible and invisible, material then suddenly dematerialised. These invisible joins were made possible using a revolutionary new adhesive. For whilst this masterpiece is almost a shadow of a chair and is loosely bound by the aesthetic strictures outlined by Tanizaki, it is wholly modern, indeed, post-modern. Here we have a Japanese designer finding

Shiro Kuramata

**Glass Chair** 1976

Glass

88 x 90 x 60cm (34 1/2 x 35 1/2 x 23 1/2in)

Courtesy of Kuramata Design Office and Friedman Benda



Shiro Kuramata

**Miss Blanche** 1988

Acrylic, artificial roses, aluminum pipe,  
stained alumite finish

92 x 62 x 60cm (36 1/2 x 24 1/2 x 23 1/2in)

Courtesy of Kuramata Design Office and Friedman Benda



his unique voice and through this, and other works, making audible the ‘new Japan’ that is at once totally original yet links to a long tradition in which both he and Takamatsu were schooled. Both men broke away from these traditions and yet reassembled the fundamental components of Japanese art and design creating a ‘oneness’ of earlier influences as well as Western elements. Just as Takamatsu knew the work of Dadaists and early proponents of action and performance art, Kuramata who attended the Western biased Kuwasawa Design School would have been fluently versed in the modernism of European and American architects. He spoke about being shocked at the still visceral originality of Charles Rene Mackintosh’s work when first encountering it. His ‘Miss Blanche’ chair (1988) is the apotheosis together with his ‘Acrylic Stool’ (with feathers) 1990, of his masterly command of Perspex. Here he has found a material that is as close to the non-material as possible. In ‘Miss Blanche’ we have roses suspended weightless in space and seemingly in time. Like an insect fossilised forever within amber, the roses have been caught mid-air, stilled in their fall. During the production process, Kuramata, a perfectionist, was on the phone every ten minutes to check on the status of the moulding process and the painstaking coming-together of the materials that make up a work that looks now, as object, effortlessly simple. The feather stool is even more delicate and reductive, it is sad now, twenty-five years after its creation, to observe a man reaching full creative maturity and to reflect on his early death, a year later. The transparency of the bulk of the volume of these editions makes us question what is here, what is visible, what is not here, and what



Supper Club Cazador, Shinjuku, Tokyo 1967  
Photograph by Fujitsuka Mitsumasa

Temporary Hoarding of Carioca Building  
Construction Site 1971  
Courtesy of Kuramata Design Office  
Photograph by Takayuki Ogawa



is not visible. Takamatsu’s ‘Shadow’ paintings ask similar questions; in them we find traces of the true subjects, the figures and objects casting shadows across his canvases are invisible to us. When proximate to a ‘Shadow’ painting we instinctively look over our shoulder to glimpse whom or what has left this flickering impression. We also wonder why our own shadow is not visible, so used are we to chasing them.

This catalogue commemorates an exhibition of works from Takamatsu’s ‘Compound’ and ‘Space in Two Dimensions’ series but also the first time Takamatsu and Kuramata’s work has been exhibited side by side outside Japan. In 1967 Kuramata was asked to design the Cazador Supper Club in Tokyo. The furniture he made for the space has a Kubrickian monumentality: space-age and utilitarian. He invited the then thirty-one-year-old Jiro Takamatsu to collaborate with him. The resulting ‘Shadow’ paintings created by Takamatsu on the walls of the venue are, like the furniture Kuramata made, now lost. This project exists only in photographic form, we have only shadows remaining from what must have been a dynamic and exciting juxtaposition of design objects and artworks that together would have created a thought-provoking whole. Takamatsu and Kuramata collaborated again in 1971 with the artist creating shadow paintings on the hoarding that hid the construction site of the Carioca building from view. Complaints from neighbours meant that the work was taken down, and like at the Cazador, hasn’t been traced. The architect John Pawson says that “the idea of a building site surrounded by spectral figures would have appealed greatly to him (Kuramata), as would the fact that Takamatsu’s installation was taken down prematurely on the grounds that the confusion it caused passers-by represented a threat to public safety. Always a decorous, scrupulously polite man, Shiro would have been amused by the association with something considered subversive of ordered behaviour”. His origins in the happenings and performance pieces made with other members of the Hi Red Center (1963–64) would have prepared Takamatsu for such uproar.



Katsushika Hokusai  
**The Great Wave off Kanagawa** 1830-1833  
 Colour woodblock

Takamatsu's and Kuramata's practices, of course, diverge and the parallels between their work can feel variously intimate and distant. Takamatsu's shadows seem to trail the artist, it is through showing examples from his wider body of work that one can better understand the man who cast them. Both men resisted the immense weight of Japanese art-history but also absorbed it. They read 'In Praise of Shadows' both accepting and rejecting its central premises. That they were able, in an era which both deified and demonised the future, to mould that future to their own idea of how art, design, and the world might look, is testament to their singular gifts. We acknowledge them now as central figures in Japan's most recent cultural ascendancy and naturally regard them both as nearly wholly modern. They both left indelible marks in their fields and it is impossible to make art or design in Japan without either referencing or resisting their legacy. As modern as they are and as polarised as their works can be from one another, it is interesting to consider a final synergy. Kuramata's furniture in irregular forms 'Side 1' (1970) has a serpentine swagger that has made it a design icon. He must surely have looked at Takamatsu's masterpiece 'The Pole of Wave' (1969) which has the sinuous rhythms of a Brancusi.

Here we have one line, like a note played by Miles Davis, made three-dimensional and held mid-air. For all its musicality it references both with title and form a wave turned icy-white, its motion stopped. Looking at another if much earlier Japanese modernist Katsushika Hokusai and his woodblock 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' (1830-1833) we see some of the same characteristics. Here we have a wave paused at the crescendo of its swell, like Bernini's Saint Theresa petrified in the apex of her ecstasy. The sea's rhythms are there, their tempo palpable but all is quiet. On the waves' lip we see the frothy fragmentation of water and for all of its power and weight there is a uniquely Japanese lightness in those drops. Like a feather caught in the wind captured in Perspex or an encounter indelibly and eternally recorded in shadow, here we have one moment made infinite that still has the ability to move us.

Jiro Takamatsu  
**The Pole of Wave** 1969  
 Wood, lacquer  
 192.5 x 9 x 9cm (76 x 3 1/2 x 3 1/2in)  
 Photograph by Stephen White



Shiro Kuramata  
**Furniture in Irregular Forms Side 1** 1970  
 Courtesy of Kuramata Design Office  
 Photograph by Mitsumasa Fujitsuka

