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The Singular Designs of Shiro Kuramata

TROY SEIDMAN DISCUSSES THE JAPANESE DESIGNER WHO BRIDGED EARLY MODERNISM, 1970S MINIMALISM, AND LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY DESIGN

IF YOU FLIP THROUGH a twentieth-century design catalogue from any of the major auction houses you will find that offerings can be easily categorized according to consistent factions. There are the French modernists, the millennial bad boys, some Tiffany or even art nouveau, and the imaginative Italians to mention a reliable few. Blue chip design is typically easy to classify. And then there is Shiro Kuramata (1934–1991). Despite his association with Memphis Milano, which can be stretched to barely cover a decade of his career, Kuramata is quite removed from stylistic or national circles. Of course, individual works and certain repeated motifs within the larger body of his work share common ground with post-modern expression from a variety of disciplines, as well as Japanese design of the late twentieth century, but Kuramata's oeuvre evolved from his preoccupations (and commissions) rather than from collective forces, schools, or any "ism." This has secured his place in both the twentieth-century design canon and the marketplace—to the point that Wright auctions gave him top billing in its January sale.

The major and most intriguing theme of his work is a consistent paradox between the whimsical and austere or the extravagant and the understated. Kuramata is an important bridge between early modernists, 1970s minimalism, and late twentieth-century design. Several of the millennial bad boys (such as Philippe Starck, Marc Newson, and Maarten Baas) are indebted to his ingenuity and eagerness to imbue retail or product design with a sense of humor. To paraphrase the design scholar and curator Deyan Sudjic, while Memphis added elements to subvert modernism, Kuramata accomplished the same by subtraction. In this edition of Grading System we'll highlight and assess four of his greatest hits.



Miss Blanche chair, 1998 "Miss Blanche" is unquestionably the design market's favorite Kuramata work, with four examples selling for more than \$100,000 since 2007, including, most recently, one going for just under \$400,000 at Phillips in London in September 2012. Such prices underscore the market's preference for the designer's last decade of creation, despite the fact that most works from the period were either manufactured or realized in editions (Miss Blanche was done in an edition of fifty-six). Kuramata first started exploring acrylic in 1968 and produced several different designs in the material during the late 1980s. While I find this chair to be awkward and gimmicky, it is nevertheless rich in allusion—to Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Marcel Duchamp. While many nuanced references to these creators can be found across Kuramata's oeuvre, Miss Blanche is most likely an homage to Duchamp—who used the name "Rose Sélavy" as his female alter-ego. In his catalogue raisonné of Kuramata's work Deyan Sudjic cites the film *A Streetcar Named Desire* as the main inspiration for the chair: the film's heroine Blanche DuBois is as fake as the plastic petals and acrylic (which Kuramata called "fake glass"). While the chair is instantly recognizable, I would argue that Kuramata's other acrylic works from this period, such as the Acrylic stool and the complementary tabletop sculptures with their suspended floating feathers, are more refined, consistent with his oeuvre, and simply prettier.

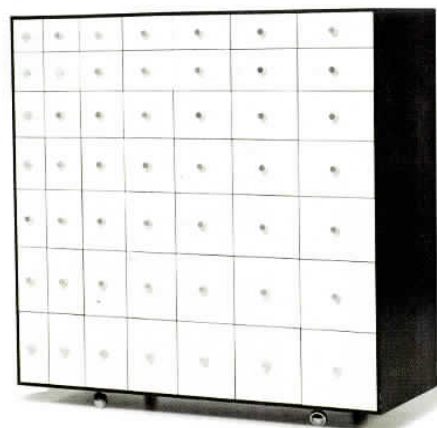
Nara table, 1983 Kuramata designed two tables made from his innovative "Star Piece Terrazzo" for the fourth Memphis Milano exhibition in 1983. Invented by Kuramata, Star Piece Terrazzo was made by randomly mixing small shards of candy-colored glass into white concrete. On first glance, the tables do not appear to be obviously related to their Memphis cousins; while the confetti-like glass recalls some of Nathalie du Pasquier's exuberant patterns, the overall effect is more accent than a dominant aesthetic. The Star Piece Terrazzo pieces are further distinguished from most Memphis furniture, which while innovative in form, pattern, and color combinations, was generally made of existing materials

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that were intended for (or appeared to be intended for) mass-market or commercial applications. The simplicity, almost banality, of the table's shape combined with the subtlety of the color resulted in a Memphis creation that is clearly filtered through the lens of Japanese restraint. If the Italian Memphis pieces are laughing unabashedly, Kuramata's tables are trying to conceal a giggle. Indeed, the Star Piece Terrazzo tables have aged better than many of their Memphis cousins, most of which need to be justified today by the reminder that they are good design from the 1980s rather than simply good design.

Furniture With Drawers, Vol. 2

#6, 1967 Experimental and evocative, this work is among Kuramata's early furniture designs and was created to satisfy his vision rather than any commercial responsibility. The tone is understated and almost austere, but the message is playful and subversive. While it seems absurd or impossible, each of the forty-nine drawers is of a different size. Kuramata began creating furniture with drawers as a defining aesthetic rather than for function. His first works not only explored this obsession but established a consistent theme in his practice: how can a piece of furniture adhere to its functional responsibilities yet simultaneously eschew them? What would you imagine storing in the bottom row of drawers here? Deyan Sudjic describes this example as the "most idiosyncratic and well-known of the pieces in the series."



Apple Honey chair, 1985 The Apple Honey chair is certainly not as well known as Kuramata's Glass chair (1976) or his How High the Moon armchair (1986), which both appear with such frequency in important twentieth-century design surveys that their impact has become somewhat diminished. Kuramata began creating furniture using chromed steel tubing in 1970 and would employ it several times over the course of the following decade. Apple Honey is arguably the best example and repeats his motif of floating or absence also seen in Miss Blanche. It is a grandchild of Le Corbusier's LC furniture and evinces Kuramata's reverence for both Thonet and Marcel Breuer. Apple Honey manifests the trifecta of the best elements of Kuramata's work: Japanese restraint, postmodern whimsy, and the poetry of repositioning a modest construction material for decorative or sculptural purposes. It's uncertain (and really irrelevant) if the tubing pierces the seat's edge and connects with the back legs for stability, but the result is a beautiful minimalist form. It recalls a giant paperclip turned into functional sculpture. This is a creation that satisfies the tenets of the Bauhaus yet subtly allows decorative elements. Unlike Kuramata's best-known chairs, it is easy to envision Apple Honey being used in a domestic or professional setting. Ultimately it is a stool with arms-backrest or simply an elaborate handle. I include Apple Honey here both for its functionality and for its accessibility today; it was manufactured first in Japan and shortly thereafter by UMS Pastoe in the Netherlands in greater numbers. For young collectors, this chair is an important entry point as it is possible to acquire a pair from the Dutch production for as little as \$1,500.

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