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AN ARTIST'S LEGACY

words : joe suzuki



Designer Shiro Kuramata's thumbprint continues to press upon modern-day design—even 17 years after his death. Kuramata, who died in 1991 at the age of 57, was perhaps the most important Japanese designer to emerge on the international scene in the 1970s. His work is defined by incorporating Japanese minimalism-style art furniture with Western shapes. He used industrial materials—aluminum, steel mesh and acrylics—to craft art furniture in mind-bending forms that teased the elements of perception. This spring, Italian furniture companies Glas Italia and Living Divani reissued Kuramata's pieces, an indicator that he continues to impact the larger design community.

Kuramata's work can be roughly divided into interior design and furniture design periods. After opening his office in 1965, Kuramata designed more than 400 spaces and over 180 pieces of furniture. Most of the spaces he designed were commercial facilities, including boutiques, showrooms, restaurants and bars. Kuramata sought to remove the element of gravity in his pieces using glass, acrylic, lighting and industrial materials. His pieces created the illusion of floating. One of his designs, a table without legs, debuted in 1976 at the Issey Miyake boutique in Tokyo. The crowd on hand watched as a long cantilever table attached directly to the wall appeared to be floating through the showroom window.

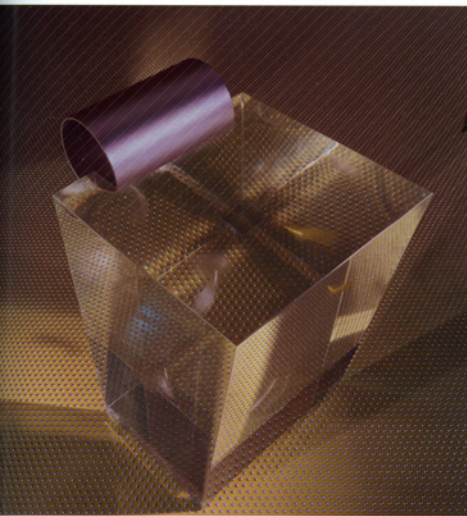
Like most chic commercial spaces, this installation only lasted for a short time. Kuramata knew his work was only temporary, but he didn't care. He actually preferred commercial spaces that were temporarily displayed. "I like transient, momentary things," Kuramata once said. "I like the tension of something that will only happen once, that will soon disappear."

For Kuramata, short-lived commercial spaces provided opportunities for design experiments. For example, the long bar table of *Bar Luccino* (1987) was made of a sheet of cracked glass sequestered between two sheets of clear glass. This effect made it appear that the cracked glass was floating in the dark bar room, whereas the round glass table from the piece *Blues in the Night* used LED red lighting. The impact of Kuramata's techniques was made evident 15 years later, when Ingo Maurer used a similar LED approach for a 2002 piece.

Café Oxy (1987) used blue lighting in the floor sections. The black, round seating pads of three-legged chairs designed for this café resembled a drifting, blue sea. Sometimes Kuramata even made doors look as though they were floating. In one Kuramata interior, visitors encountered doors without knobs or handles that functioned as dangling art pieces.

The spaces Kuramata designed for restaurants and bars were far from ordinary, and always entertaining to visitors. Many of his designs were for small, secret spaces, filled with the charm of Tokyo.

He also designed everything for *Spiral*, a shop featuring his work that opened in 1990. Huge blue partitions hung from the ceiling. *Acrylic Stool*, an important piece made



specifically for Spiral, consisted of a large block of clear acrylic with yellow and white feathers dangling inside.

While many of Kuramata's pieces were produced for use within pre-determined spaces (boutiques, restaurants, bars), he was conscious of the inhibiting nature of such projects—in terms of cost, construction, marketing, etc. Furniture design, on the other hand, seemed relatively limitless to the designer.

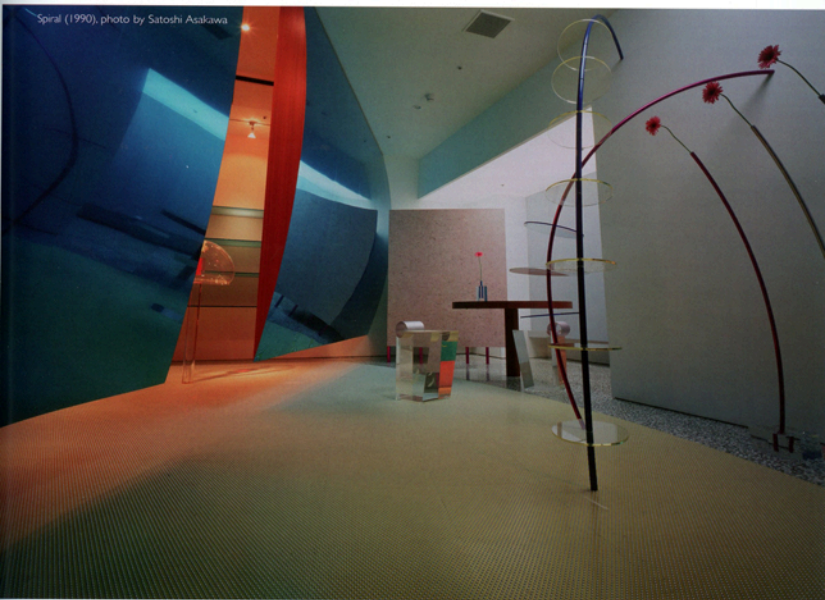
Acrylic Stool laid the foundation for Kuramata's 1988 chair *Miss Blanche*, named after the heroine of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Made of a 2.4 inch-thick piece of transparent acrylic glass, the chair features a scattered bouquet of paper roses inside, giving the illusion of real flowers. Just as *Miss Blanche*'s character lived in

a false world, the flowers, too, are artificial. "He was a movie lover," says Kuramata's widow, Mieko Kuramata, who continues to run the Kuramata Design Office in Tokyo. "He also loved jazz, and so several pieces of his furniture were named for jazz songs."

In 1981, Ettore Sottsass commissioned Kuramata to contribute to the Italian design collective Memphis. Enlivened by Sottsass' love for bright color, Kuramata's Memphis furniture series heightened his profile internationally. The Italian creative group was responsible for the biggest design movement of 1980s. "Before working with Sottsass, Kuramata didn't name his furniture. This time, Italians put names for his furniture, like *Kyoto*," Mrs. Kuramata adds. "After this experience, Kuramata began to use romantic names for his works."



Bar Lucchino (1987), photo by Hiroiyuki Hirai



At an early stage in his career, Kuramata designed chests of drawers that he thought would resonate with men. For him, drawers were not just containers; rather, they served to hint at what was hidden inside. Kuramata approached design with the grace of a poet. *Pyramid Furniture* (1968) is among his earliest drawer designs. Using acrylic for the outer frames, shelves seem to float against gravity. This classic cabinet is still available at Cappellini (www.cappellini.it).

In *K-series*, Kuramata designed a fixture for Yamagiwa Lighting fabricated from acrylic. It appears as a piece of white cloth rising of its own accord, in the manner of an apparition. This 1972 piece continues to be sold by Yamagiwa (www.yamagiuwausa.com/out.html).

Kuramata broke ground using steel mesh in his designs. To represent lightness, Kuramata introduced expanded steel mesh for the legs of *Twilight Time* in 1985. "To adjust the shape of these legs to fit the heavy glass

top, craftsmen spent more than few days," Mrs. Kuramata says. *How High the Moon* (1986) is a sofa made entirely of expanded steel mesh. Creating this unorthodoxly built sofa required craftsmen to weld until the steel was thin. The sofa looks delicate, but also strong, as though it could resist gravity. Thanks to Vitra's latest edition, this chair may be most famous outside Japan (www.vitra.com).

Japanese artist Shintaro Tanaka, an old friend of Kuramata, says, "He wanted to create something exceeding sculpture with furniture." Though Kuramata produced traditional shapes, his attempts to remove the elements of gravity using basic materials set him far apart from his counterparts. Thanks to this delicate balance, the ripple effects of Kuramata's work are felt even today, and, if we're lucky, for years to come.

Images on this page and Acrylic Stool on previous are presented courtesy of Kuramata Design Office.