

MAIKO SUGANO

As early as elementary school Maiko Sugano wanted to be an artist. With a January birthday, she was younger and smaller than most of her classmates; she couldn't run quite as quickly, nor throw quite as hard in dodge ball, but she loved books and understood what her art teachers were asking. The shy, quiet child thrived in art class.

After high school Sugano attended the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music¹, where she pursued 3D design. The experience of fabricating a dreamlike custom shower chair from plastics, resins, and fiberglass, prompted Sugano to question the materials to which she was subjecting her body. She moved from there in a more intimate direction, creating a daily ritual to carve a bar of soap, with the form tied to the experience of that day. In exhibition, each small sculptural work was presented on a wooden plinth or balustrade in an ascending, temple-like form, grand in structure and commonplace in its materials. The artist explored these elements as metaphor for the body and our fragile and fleeting nature; our own being, she says, will quickly disappear and wash away.

Out of school, Sugano followed her father's advice and took a design job in a small company. Finishing university at the precise moment when the hand skills of drawing shifted to the technology-based skills of digital design, the work at the company was frustrating and unsatisfying, so she left, taking the opportunity to travel. Airline specials at the time offered "Around the World" tickets; the traveler could get off at one city on each continent, and from that city travel by land, getting on a plane again to fly to the next continent to the west. She quit the design job and set off.

A trip around the world is both metaphor and reality, an epic adventure through every modality of travel: on foot, busses, trains, and airplanes. The possibilities echoed a childhood game she and her younger brother played that they called "Around the World." Traveling atop their garden fence, the two children traversed various materials from stable concrete and stone to stretches of slender steel bar; staying upright on top of even this small world was not easy.

This time Sugano went from Japan to Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and across China to Pakistan, where she stopped on the western slopes of the Himalayas, a landscape at once exquisite and unimaginably harsh. With little humidity, Sugano could see far into the distance. "I could see clearly the mountain's skin, and I realized this looks like furniture." Against such terrain, our small size and fleeting existence is tangible. The highest mountain range in the world can suddenly seem like furnishings on the earth's surface. In the face of this enormity and grandeur, Sugano understood what she wanted to make. The personal shower stall would end in waste; she wanted to make work with attention to material and environmental impact, either built to last 100 years, or that which would naturally decay and disappear.

At the base of the Himalayas—in a desert region without trees or grass, just stones and a searing sun—one of Sugano's two fellow hikers disappeared ahead quickly. Her remaining companion had little water and was parched on a mirage-like desert trail. Surrounded by what the artist described as naked mountains, she caught sight of a cairn that marked the path, a wayfinder that can guide and even save the life of a hiker. For

¹ Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music was renamed Tokyo University of the Arts in 2008.

someone shy and easily overwhelmed by too many people, this was a marker of human presence, something only humans do. “It’s not so comfortable, people standing next to me in the commuter train of Tokyo, but in this harsh setting I was relieved being with humans. In the natural world, I appreciate the existence of, the presence of, a human being. It [the cairn] cannot be made by nature but is created stone by stone.” It became for Sugano an emblem of what the arts can be. Following the trail demarcated by this pile of rocks brought her to a small house where a traditional Punjab grandmother and daughter offered the hikers milk tea with salt. A gift. A balm.

From the Himalayas, Sugano traveled through Western Europe and ultimately arrived in San Francisco, where she connected with Donald Fortescue in the furniture department at California College of the Arts. She spent three years in the department, developing her woodworking skills and confidence in the languages of her art practice. In the last fifteen years Sugano has worked across materials and modalities, from the personal and intimate, to the site specific and landscape scale.

Sugano describes her art today much like religion: she’s worshipping the natural world, a sustained inquiry made visible in her work. In an art world where being seen is paramount, she drawn to exploring that which will decay and eventually disappear.

In 2016, five years after the earthquake and tsunami resulted in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, the radioactive contamination in the soil outside her home in Japan remained at twice allowable levels. That same year Sugano had an opportunity to create work for a land art festival on the east coast of Taiwan. The artist describes wanting to dive deep into healthy soil, an impulse that emerged as a work entitled *Turtle*. She carved a sloping rectangular swathe into the ground, a portal or a path at the scale of her body, with the end closest to the sea covered by two stones and a large carved wooden form that together conjure the body of a turtle. That portion of Taiwan’s coast has always been seasonal habitat for sea turtles who come ashore, dig holes to lay their eggs, and return to the sea. As with all sea creatures, they’re threatened by human development, warming temperatures, and beaches lost to sea level rise. In *Tearoom of Tankawa* (2021) she transforms materials found on the forest floor into a sculptural dwelling that echoes Earthworks but with attention to sustainability and environmental impact that’s both contemporary and personal to the artist’s ethic.

In the studios in Philadelphia, Sugano is transforming hulking rounds of discarded oaks felled nearby into exquisitely carved bowls and other domestic items. From chainsaw, to chisel, and finally a small carving knife, Sugano moves from pith to sapwood and bark, paring down the trunk to the portion with density and characteristics right for her pieces. The trunk’s center is too hard and the thick sapwood layer too soft and showing visible signs of rot and crack after months on the ground. In pass after pass she carves away, steadying the motor against her thigh to support the weight. Patiently she finds the portion that will become the bowl. Once she has the blank, Sugano takes the chainsaw and carves away at the convex underside of a bowl with a level of control and patience that invite viewers to think differently about the possibilities of the tool, before turning to the chisel and knife to create the recess and refine the shape of the piece she’s envisioned.