

Sounds of the Earth

The work of Katsumi Mukai

BY TERRY MARTIN



Katsumi Mukai is a solid, compact man who gives an impression of great strength, both of body and spirit. When he plants his legs and crosses his arms, as he often does, he looks as rooted and as immovable as a tree. He has a strong face made of broad planes that lift in open smiles at every opportunity, especially when he speaks about his love of the earth. When he

coast is battered by wild storms. Mukai himself is in no doubt that much of his personality is due to growing up close to nature in this wild area.

Until 1992, Mukai was a painter in Tokyo, where he had good success. But he did not enjoy being inside all the time, so he moved to Nasu, a mountain region in the heart of Honshu among heavily forested

his work are all found in the natural world: "Even when I was a painter, I was always interested in natural phenomena such as the climate, heat, cold, clear or cloudy skies. I am acutely aware of my own relationship with nature and my existence in the natural environment. I see the color of the wind, smell the clouds, and hear the rays of the sun. All of these things are very important



Elemental, beautiful, and rooted in their natural surroundings, the sculptures of Katsumi Mukai—like “Kaze” (wind), above—connect his woodworking to the earth.

talks, it is in brief sentences and simple statements, punctuated with brisk movements of his hands.

The second impression of Mukai is his bluntness. Outsiders are often amazed by the complex formality of Japanese society, all compliment and counter-compliment, with self-effacement the norm. Not for Mukai-san. Still, he manages to be blunt in such an open, patently honest manner that no offense can be taken.

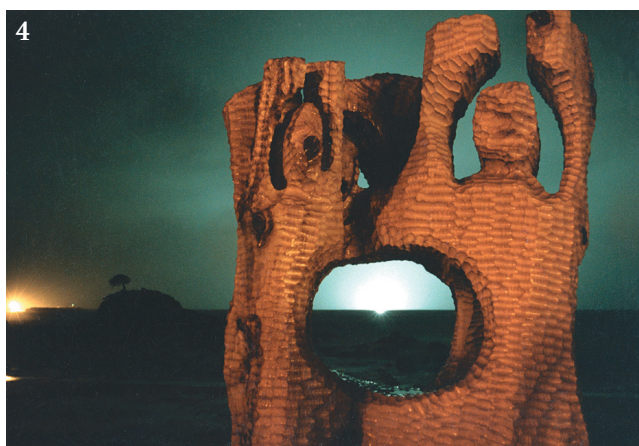
Probably this is partly due to his origins. Mukai was born on the peninsula of Shimokita at the extreme northern tip of Japan's main island of Honshu. It is a region where harsh blizzards blow snow from Siberia to bury entire villages, and the rugged

national parks. It was a significant move that changed the direction of his life. As he explains, "Since my childhood I've had a lot to do with wood, either gathering firewood, or living in the woods. But until I moved to Nasu I had forgotten just how much of the trees I had within me. It rekindled my awareness, and I decided I wanted to express my feelings about nature through this awareness." At the age of thirty-five, he was strong and ready to use his body. There were a lot of big pieces of wood around and he felt the urge to do something with them. "I started to carve wood, and Nasu is now the geographical point where I make my art and which defines my art."

He makes it clear that the influences on

in my life."

This feeling is present in everything he makes. "When I started carving wood," he says, "the first piece I made was called 'Sounds of Earth.' I believe everything is alive. Even trees have something like blood moving through them. Although we can't hear it, this is the sound of the earth and it includes all natural things. Great trees are surrounded by nature for hundreds of years. It's as if they listen to the sounds around them—birds, water, snow, wind. When I stand among the trees I wonder about that, so it's not surprising that my work reflects their shapes. Even the smallest piece of wood weaves light and shadow



around its form. This is what I am trying to express.”

Mukai not only has a strong sense of place, but also of community, and these elements permeate every aspect of his work. Although he does exhibit in galleries, whenever possible his pieces are placed within the environment that inspires them and are made from materials sourced locally. He involves the community, working off their energy, and incorporates native materials, reflecting the immediate environment and absorbing the energy of the land.

A good example of this is “Umi no Dori” (“Ocean Birds”) (1), which is in Mukai’s home territory of Aomori. The piece is cut from local *hiba* (white cedar) and reflects the

marine environment. By slabbing and layering the trunk, he echoes the layered structure of the seaside. Wet sand, dry sand, seashells, seagrass, wind-swept shrubs—all tumble one over the other to the sea. Above all the birds spread their wings. It is rough and elemental, just like the shore it overlooks.

“Nami no Hana” (“Sea Flower”) (2), also cut from *hiba*, is installed among the houses of a small seaside community. It’s weathered greyness is like the pragmatic color of the neighboring buildings. Resembling scoured driftwood, this piece will continue to erode and change with the surrounding landscape.

Mukai has such passion for his work that he is able to carry others along on the

back of his enthusiasm. As proof of this, five years ago on the Shimokita peninsula where Mukai was born, local villagers worked long and hard in the snow with him carving huge pieces of *hiba* into a row of figures with their arms in the air. This *banzai* position is traditional among Japanese when they raise a cheer, as they enjoyed doing when the work was complete (3). The holes in the figures are for viewing the islands out to sea, or the lights of the fishing boats as they work at night (4).

“Kaze” (“Wind”) (5) is a recurring theme in much of Mukai’s work. The twisted forms which he has erected along the Aomori shore are like vortices of swirl-



ing wind, not only catching the sound and force of the air, but accumulating the snow which blows along the shore. At night (photo, page 25), they also frame the lights of the fishing boats as they troll close to shore. Another in this “Kaze” series (6) stands in community parkland, also changing its aspect with the seasons.

The importance of this sense of place is best illustrated by viewing similar pieces both in a gallery and outdoors in the space for which they are created. “Chion II” (“Sound of Earth II”), cut from *keyaki* (Japanese elm), fills a gallery with a powerful presence (8), rising to the roof in waving, intertwining blades of wood. But the work is somehow subdued by the space, pressed down by the

roof and planted on the unyielding floor. A similar work in *hiba* is planted in a summer field where the long, sinuous shapes twine and twist like the summer grasses (7). It simply belongs where it is.

This is why Mukai wants his work to always be remembered as part of the environment which inspires it. He feels that it is incomplete by itself and, to reinforce this message, he takes on the enormous task of finding places which suit each piece, then transporting the pieces there to have them photographed by his good friend Masayoshi Tabe. Mukai’s vision is similar to that of the British environmental sculptor Andy Goldsworthy, although Mukai says he has never seen his work. Like Gold-

sworthy’s famous books, these images are not just a record of work, but a part of the art, preserving fleeting moments of light, weather and cloud. They help those who were not there to understand just what Mukai is trying to express.

The faceted face of a quarry (9) echoes the chiselled surface of one of Mukai’s “Kazoku” (“Family”) series, just as the scooped grooves in the wood can be mirrored by the ripples of water in a pond (10). This is no mere fancy—it is impossible to see these pieces, so lovingly placed in nature, and not understand his sincerity and commitment.

“Kazoku” (family) is a recurring theme in Mukai’s work. He has made a whole series of these pieces, starting with the first

Working with Communities

by Katsumi Mukai



PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY LUDWIG FRANK

I'M OFTEN INVITED to work at festivals. I like that because I meet the local people and we make something together. I really like working with children. The memory that these people have of working on a large piece of wood is the most important part of the work. If one of them is five years old, by the time she is old the piece may no longer exist other than in her memory. So the memory becomes more important than the piece itself.

At the Tollwood Festival in Munich in 2001, the work I made with volunteer help was donated to a refuge center where 200 children live. "Family" is in the garden at the center now. The children can use the wooden steps to climb inside the wood and play. It's a simple idea, but I like to think it reminds us of the importance of relationships for all of us.

To make such big pieces, I usually start with a big chainsaw. I'd be happy to finish with

the chainsaw and then let the air and water and wind continue to shape the piece. But there are certain things which can't be done with a chainsaw. I use big gouges, which I like a lot. The raw finish of a gouge cut is very weather-resistant. If you sand wood, it allows rot in more easily. The gouge shears the wood cleanly. When people see me working with the gouge, they want to try it too.

People in other countries are always impressed with Japanese tradition, but I'm not worried about being a traditional Japanese woodworker. You know, I don't even use Japanese gouges. Swiss tools work better for me. Japanese tools are designed to slice, but western tools are designed to cut with the kind of mallet strokes I use. Also, I don't like sharpening tools all the time, and Japanese tools get dull too quickly when I use them. That surprises people, but life is full of surprises!

shape in Los Angeles in 1997 (11). He found that it worked both as a design idea and on a practical level. Carving the whole trunk of a tree is a challenge because it tends to split radially as it dries. However, removing the core of the trunk means it can dry without cracking. After this first realization, Mukai produced more similar sculptures that increasingly resembled human forms, particularly male and female pairs.

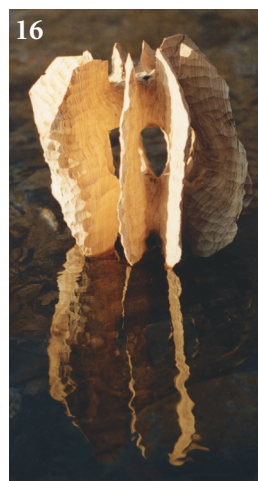
As he was conscious of the impact of towering tree trunks, Mukai wanted to increase the scale of his work, and later "Kazoku" (12) started to achieve truly monumental proportions. Some of his "Kaze" series have reached over ten meters in height (13).

One of Mukai's strongest "Kazoku" was made in 1997 in Korea (14). It was installed in a shopping precinct where, unlike his spread-out sculptures which are set in natural environments, the individual elements of this sculpture huddle together protectively. Was he reflecting the crowded press of the urban Korean cities? Are the trees shrinking from the onslaught of traffic and buildings that eat the forest and steal the air? What is the family he refers to? Is it the family of humankind to which we all belong? It is hard not to feel drawn to this knot of figures, to explore their tense relationship and to peer within.

Mukai loves this kind of challenging idea. At the Gifu Festival in Japan, Mukai made an enormous untitled piece which was placed in front of an imposing office façade (15). The trees are twisted and thrown down, suggesting that we have destroyed so much in the search for progress and that modern buildings have no connection with the environment they have supplanted. This is minimalist work, but its scale and strength is profound, and its resonance is deep and far-reaching.

Not all of Mukai's work is on such a monumental scale. His sliced-apple-like forms (16) carved in *shira* (Japanese oak) are only a foot or so high and are light enough to easily be lifted and explored by hand. He likes to feel there is a sexual dimension to these pieces, as with the breast-form "Breathing" (17), which he also created in *shira*—nurture, nature and fecundity all in the same piece.

When I ask Mukai why he pursued this brutally hard work, he laughs. "I'm stronger now than I ever was," he says. "I



want to make bigger and bigger pieces.” Mukai’s chosen life is not easy. He earns barely enough to live on and struggles for recognition. But he has no regrets: “It’s been wonderful. I’ve been to many countries and in each country I see various wood cultures and tools, as well as different people.” For a man who is fighting hard against the destruction of native Japanese forests, he has learned much in his travels about how other countries have treated their trees. “There are places where the forests have been destroyed and some are already deserts. I am eager to understand why that has occurred. I have been to Korea, Germany, Austria, the USA and Canada. Every country has its own unique history of its trees. By visiting all these places I learn. I want to incorporate what

I have learned in my work. I’m fully alive when I am doing this.”

Katsumi Mukai is a genuinely dedicated environmental artist, although he is not really sure what he would call himself. At home in his studio surrounded by carvings, he leans back and ponders. “I don’t really feel like a sculptor and I don’t want to call myself an artist either. I suppose I’m a maker of some sort. What I want to do is influence people through what I make without being categorized.” Still, I am sure

he would not mind if he was categorized as a good man.

Terry Martin is a contributing editor for Woodwork Magazine.



PHOTO BY TERRY MARTIN