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Aesthetics of Tranquility. A Conversation with Kimiaki Kageyama

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KAMO RIVER, a ring on Nana's finger, 300 years old urushi, 20KYG, pigment of cinnabar, fine gold pigment, amethyst crystal, epoxy resin, 25 × 45 × 25 mm, 2016. Photo by Yuki Kageyama.

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Among many pieces of jewelry, there are a few that look to unfold a part of the secret of why people wear jewelry. For me, Kimiaki Kageyama's jewelry is one of these works. His realistically made plants and use of urushi lacquer fragments from an old portable shrine remind me of fundamental affection for something ephemeral as well as human desire for eternity – both are primary sentiments people project onto jewelry in general.



Furthermore, his work indicates that the real significance of being timeless lies not in the object's immortality but in its ability to stir up sympathy within the viewer from any period of time. This interview is based on two conversations I had with Kimiaki Kageyama to take a glimpse at his background and attitude toward jewelry.

日本語版 - Japanese version



You majored in Metal Hammering when you were at university, but how did you become interested in jewelry and start jewelry making?

Kageyama: I first made jewelry when I was a university student. At Tokyo University of the Arts, the Metal Hammering, Metal Carving, and Metal Casting courses all shared the same floor, which allowed students to visit any of the three workshops for tools or instructions from the professors of other courses.

At that time, Prof. Yasuki Hiramatsu, Prof. Yoji Yamawaki, and Nobuko Ishikawa from the Metal Carving course, the latter a founder of Kan Jewelry, and Prof. Kohei Miyata from the Metal Casting course would make jewelry with an artistic touch. This environment greatly motivated me to begin work on jewelry, even though I was not taught by them in person.

Especially, Prof. Hiramatsu inspired me significantly with his innovative use of crumpled thin gold sheet with its back reinforced with enamel. He had just founded the Japan Craft Design Association and Japan Jewellery Designers Association and encouraged me to apply for competitions. At the time, jewelry made up just ten to twenty percent of my entire oeuvre, with the remainder comprising metalware such as vessels and vases.



Brushstrokes, brooch, silver, 100 × 50 × 15 mm, 1987. Photo by Kimiaki Kageyama.

What kind of path did you choose after graduation?

Kageyama: I launched a studio with my peers, who included a graphic designer and a sculptor as well as metalsmiths. We named it SUPERMOUSE as all of us were born in the year of the rat in the Chinese astrological calendar. We had a maximum of six people and were commissioned to create metal gates, shop signs, and so on while working individually.

Meanwhile, I began making jewelry. The first client was Sakaguchi & Co., Ltd, a well-established jeweler. My pieces were included in their designers' collection along



with jewelry from other artists. They provided me with abundant colored stones, diamonds, and precious metals to create almost anything I wanted, which was fortunate for me.

Is there any other work you still remember vividly?

Kageyama: I was in charge of creating part of a jewelry collection for Takanawakai, an exclusive invitation-only exhibition and sale organized by Seibu Department Stores, Ltd. A friend of mine introduced me to this work and I first made a jewelry line designed by Kazumasa Nagai, a renowned graphic designer. They liked the results and asked me to work on the second and third series of Kazumasa's jewelry.

Their popularity led to yet another jewelry collection designed by artists from other disciplines such as Kyoji Takubo, a contemporary artist, and Matazo Kayama, a Japanese-style painter. These took place in the 80s.



Sketches for urushi ring, 2013-2015. Photo by Yuki Kageyama.

In addition to these commissions, you have a long career as a teacher and are still teaching at Hiko Mizuno College of Jewelry in Tokyo.

Kageyama: I got to know the work at Hiko Mizuno in 1974 through a friend of mine, when I was in my second year at graduate school. At that time, Hiko Mizuno was operating in a rented room at a school for a small number of students and I began teaching design on a night course. As the school grew to establish an official postsecondary course, the need arose for a formal curriculum covering both jewelry making and design. For this purpose, I schematized the design techniques into the three volumes of "Houseki Design Kyoshitsu (Jewelry Design Handbook)," the contents of which range from the basics of three-dimensional drawing to more stylized illustration for competitions. I used them as textbooks. As the school developed even further, I reduced my commissioned works in order to become a full-time lecturer and focus more on education.

In 2005, Hiko Mizuno launched an institute that offers a postgraduate year for advanced study. I taught there for ten years with Mikiko Minewaki. The curriculum aimed to develop students' comprehensive presentation skills. Namely, their display skills with an exhibit along a school corridor and an assignment of installation work, their branding skills through research on accessible size and price, and also their lecturing skills through a presentation to their juniors. We also invited lecturers from overseas, such as Otto Künzli, Bernhard Schobinger, and Ulrich Reithofer.

Including the graduates from the institute you just mentioned, the school has produced a lot of contemporary jewelry artists.

Kageyama: For that, I think the credit must be given to Kazuhiro Itoh. We first met through a mutual friend, which led to him working for Hiko Mizuno. At that time, he was already working as an independent artist but was a maverick, so the first thing he said at the initial meeting was "I want peers." He was enthusiastic about educating the younger generation in order to avoid an inevitable decline in the jewelry field in Japan.

After I brought him in, he taught design for a year. Meanwhile, I prepared an



environment that would enable him to venture into more creative assignments from the second year. These included “Earth Jewelry” in which, with kindergarteners, he and his students buried keepsakes in round-, triangle- and square-shaped holes they had made in the ground. He engaged in a series of these kinds of creative projects and contributed a lot to add a new dimension to the school.

It was as late as the 90s that you began presenting major series of your works. Was this because the commission works and teaching had preoccupied you until then?

Kageyama: I would also create a small number of works for competitions during the 70s and 80s alongside the two major occupations you mentioned. I altered my way of working in the 90s in the hope of dedicating myself more to my own artistic practice. My participation in Schmuck 1992 on the recommendation of Erico Nagai provided the motivation for me to do that.

In 1993, I held my first solo jewelry exhibition, *Image of Cinnabar, The fragment of time-1*, at Gallery IF, which is now closed. The exhibition highlighted lacquer works, and one of the exhibits was a necklace. For this, I hung 0.3-mm-thick metal wires from the ceiling and encrusted the surfaces with dripping urushi lacquer. I put them together into a bundle and made a necklace so that the wires would hang nicely in front of the wearer’s body. I wanted to show an intriguing texture created by the counteraction of the urushi lacquer against gravity. The work came about by accident in my studio. I happened to hit metal pieces with a brush loaded with urushi lacquer, which eventually hardened into drops. The sight of the beautiful shapes prompted me to develop them into a proper body of work.



(Left) *Image of Cinnabar, necklace, 20KYG, urushi, 1000 × 600 × 100 mm. 1993.*

(Right) *The detail of the same work.*

Photos by Kimiaki Kageyama.

Was that your first time of working with a material other than metals?

Kageyama: I’d had the chance to experience different courses for three or four months when I was a second-year student at university, so I already had basic skills in urushi lacquer and ceramics.

You used lacquer in another form in another solo exhibition entitled *Portable Shrine, The fragment of time-2 (1999)* in which you crafted a series of jewelry from stripped lacquer fragments of an old portable shrine.

Kageyama: Those lacquer fragments originally belonged to one of the three portable shrines from Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto. When I visited, the portable shrine had already been stripped to its bare wood structure, and the removed lacquer paints had been set aside ready to be thrown away. They looked shiny and very beautiful. My intention at that moment had not been to develop them into jewelry, but I decided to bring them back home anyway because I thought it would be a waste to throw them away.



During the making process, shaping the overall form was fun but treating the gaps was a process of trial and error before I settled on cinnabar pigment as the material, as used for Japanese-style painting. I explored further and mixed the cinnabar with the gold powder used in the maki-e technique, before finally arriving at the current treatment. This sort of experimental idea would perhaps only occur to more of a non-professional outsider like myself than it would to a maki-e expert. Having said that, I think the whole story can be boiled down to my haphazard interest in the experiment. Just like the stripped urushi fragments caught my eye by chance.



KAMO RIVER, ring, 300 years old urushi, 20KYG, pigment of cinnabar, gold pigment, a big ruby crystal, epoxy resin, 23 × 23 × 35 mm, 2015-2016. Photo by Kimiaki Kageyama.



KAMO RIVER, ring, 300 years old urushi, 20KYG, pigment of cinnabar, fine gold pigment, epoxy resin, 35 × 40 × 30 mm, 2016. Photo by Kimiaki Kageyama.

You described it 'by chance' but I have an impression that a fascination



with objects weathered over a long period of time is inherent in your aesthetic.

Kageyama: I think any Japanese person would have a fascination with something weathered.

Do you think such a sensibility runs in younger generations too? Whether Japanese or not, bringing up a certain aesthetic and spirituality are more or less connected to what you see and experience in your everyday life, but I think younger people have less chances for that.

Kageyama: Some of them develop a taste for it, but I understand it may be difficult to expect these types of sensibilities from the current generation. When I was teaching at the institute, I showed part of my collection to the young students in an attempt to nurture an aesthetic unique to Japan. In Japan, there is a great variety of objects displaying virtuosity, and it takes forever to show everything. For example, there are several variations within Koryo dynasty tea bowls from Korea, and even within one style of porcelain Imari ware. You need to be using these things in your everyday life, though, in order to fully appreciate them.

Then, how did you become familiar with crafts and tradition?

Kageyama: I naturally had chances to appreciate masterworks in person, including metal objects made by my professors. I have friends from university in both urushi lacquer and ceramic circles, so I have seen the development of their works since then. After all these years, many of them have gone on to produce excellent works.



Withered leaves, brooch, iron, 18KYG, 150 × 60 × 20 mm, 2002. Photo by Kimiaki Kageyama.

Now I'd like to ask you about another ongoing series, *Defoliation. The fragment of time-3* from 2003. How did it start?

Kageyama: About twenty years ago, I moved from Funabashi to Yamanashi, where I still live today. One cold morning, a few years after the move, my daughter and I were taking a walk along a street lined with mountain cherry blossoms. I came across a pile of frosted fallen leaves from last autumn around a tree. One leaf caught my eye for its extraordinary power, and I have kept it to this day. In hindsight, it had to do with a book I was reading at the time. The book, "The rain of lemon juice: the world environment and Japan's role," was about how acid rain can damage forests, so that's probably why the leaves captured my attention.

It was then that the idea struck me of making a metal leaf identical to the one I had just picked up. I gave myself up to the work and hammered an iron sheet day in, day out. Then, after two weeks, I finally had a completed single leaf. I must have been obsessed because I don't usually stick to one piece for so long. The completed leaf put me in awe, which must have been an aura coming from the high concentration and attention.

Do you still have the first iron leaf?

Kageyama: No, it was sold. I was able to speed up the pace from the second piece, so I made one after another. Therefore, the idea of keeping the first one didn't occur to me. Up to now, I've made about twenty mountain cherry blossom leaves in different



positions. Whether it's a leaf, a Japanese plum, or a rose, I always keep a real plant by my side during the making process. Otherwise, the piece can end up looking somewhat fake.

Is it about making a faithful reproduction?

Kageyama: The act itself may involve reproducing something, but what I seek is different. If there is an object in front of you, you feel its indescribable presence or aura, don't you?

I remember a lecture on craft by Prof. Taiji Maeda that I heard around the age of nineteen. He said that a true masterpiece takes control of the air around it, and some control a small space, but others radiate something far-reaching. He was probably encouraging us to produce works that radiate a lot of that something.

Although it didn't sound right to me at first, I came to understand what he meant as I attended his class for an entire year. I also saw a lot of masterworks along the way. His remark prompted me to pay attention to the space controlled by a piece whenever I see any object or painting. I think it helped foster an eye for art, too.

So do you think about something like an aura when you make works?

Kageyama: I don't intend for my work to exude an aura while I'm making it. Looking back, however, I've always thought about what an aura from a complete piece would be like or how I should read the air around the working piece.

Maybe, in other words, shaping a form is not enough and it is extracting the inherent serenity, tranquility, or essence that matters more. The end result never outweighs the real flower, that's for sure. But expression through the form of the original is what art is supposed to be. In the past, Albrecht Dürer produced portraits and Michelangelo created sculptures, but every painter and sculptor have tried to achieve the same goal.

In the case of jewelry, the aura of the piece becomes one with the wearer.

Kageyama: Jewelry is three-dimensional and interacts with the complex shape of the human body, so you need to consider how the piece will blend with the wearer. I think this aspect makes jewelry interesting. Something that is missing when the jewelry is first placed could come forth the moment the piece is worn. For me, presupposed wearability makes jewelry making easier than object making.



Summer at Lake Irako, pendant, ivory, egg tempera, gold pigments, gold leaf, 65 × 33 × 8 mm, 2004. Photo by Kimiaki Kageyama.



Some artists from other disciplines say jewelry making is difficult due to the restrictions imposed by wearability such as weight and form.

Kageyama: Those aspects don't cause me stress at all. Let's take a brooch as an example. You might think that seeing it on a table doesn't differ much from seeing it on your chest, as both surfaces are flat – that's a big mistake. Even a single body part like the chest consists of even smaller and complicated spaces. And when people wear a brooch, they always find a place where the piece looks best, which is convincing enough for me to believe the human body is the best stage for a brooch.

Look at earrings. Their three-dimensionality becomes most striking when worn. The same goes for a ring. If you look at it as a three-dimensional object, you will notice how nicely it fits into a very beautiful space on your hand. Thinking about how well structured the human body is for jewelry makes it easier to proceed if I can think of the final piece being worn on a specific person's body.

Do you have a specific wearer in your mind when you make every single piece?

Kageyama: Not always, but I do often imagine someone who is close to me as the wearer. For the first iron leaf from the *Defoliatin* series, I envisioned my daughter wearing a completed piece while I was working. This may be because I was with her when I found the particular leaf. One of the urushi lacquer rings came about following a similar episode. My granddaughter, Nana, stopped by my studio and said, "Make me jewelry." So we started to play, putting various stones on her fingers. Then, I crafted one of these into a ring on a lark.

Lastly, can you talk about what's coming in the near future?

Kageyama: I plan to participate in a group exhibition in Europe in May 2017 and will hold a solo exhibition in Taiwan in March 2018.





Rose, Esquisse, 2006. Photo by Kimiaki Kageyama.

About the Interviewed

Kimiaki Kageyama. Born in 1948, Shizuoka, Japan. He achieved a BA in Craft of Fine Arts in 1972 and an MA in Metalworks in 1974 from Tokyo University of the Arts. His participation in numerous solo and group exhibitions first started when he was a university student. His recent major exhibitions include a two-man show, *Kimiaki Kageyama & Bernhard Schobinger* (2010), a solo show, *STILL FLOWERS* (2014), at Gallery SO in London, and another solo show, *Kamo River* (2016), at Jewelers' Werk Galerie in Washington, D.C. His work been shown regularly at Schmuck since 1992 as well as COLLECT, a renowned art fair by the Crafts Council (2009, 2010, 2015, 2016 and 2017). He won the Herbert Hofmann Prize in 2015 and is an appointed lecturer in numerous international and domestic workshops. His work is included in the collection of Die Neue Sammlung, the International Design Museum Munich, Germany.

About the author



Makiko Akiyama. Writer and translator. Born in 1979 in Osaka, Japan. In 2013 launched a newsletter for Japanese readers featuring translated articles about art jewelry. Contributing writer for klimto2, Current Obsession, Art Jewelry Forum, and Norwegian Crafts.

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