

Why Make Podcast, Wendy Maruyama Episode Part 1 Transcript

Time Code

00:00 **Robb Helmkamp**

Hello and welcome to Why Make, where we talk to makers from different disciplines about what inspires them to make. With your hosts Robb Helmkamp and,

Erik Wolken

Erik Wolken. If you would like to learn more about the makers we interview on Why Make please go our website why-make.com

Robb Helmkamp

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01:01 **Robb Helmkamp**

Welcome to our first podcast of the 2023 season of Why Make. This episode is part one of our in depth conversation with the artist Wendy Maruyama.

Erik Wolken

Wendy Maruyama is a furniture maker, sculptor and retired educator who resides in San Diego California. Wendy's work has tackled a wide scope topics from traditional furniture forms to exploring her Japanese heritage and the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during WW2 to the issue of endangered species.

Robb Helmkamp

As we discuss later in the podcast Wendy was born with significant hearing loss and cerebral palsy and at her request, to aid our listeners, we have included a full transcript of our conversation on our web page for this episode which can be found on the *podcast* page of why-make.com It can also be found in the episode notes on Apple podcasts

Erik Wolken

Please join us and take a listen to our wide ranging discussion with one of the more amazing artists in the woodworking field, Wendy Maruyama.

02:03 **Erik Wolken**

Okay, are we ready to have a very serious conversation about nothing?

Wendy Maruyama

Oh, yeah that will be fine by my book.

Erik Wolken

We'd like to welcome Wendy Maruyama to the Why Make? Podcast.

Robb Helmkamp

Welcome Wendy. Welcome to Why Make!

Wendy Maruyama

Thank you! Thank you for having me, you guys.

Erik Wolken

The question we always start the podcast with is: What is your first memory of making something?

02:00 **Wendy Maruyama**

Well, you know, I can remember when I was maybe four or five years old, my mom used to bring home these little art kits, craft kits, maybe not coloring books. But things that you had to like put together. And I remember very distinctly a paper cutout book where we had to fold them and they were sort of kinetic. I remember I was more interested in the whole fabrication process verses drawing and painting. Although I did draw and paint when I was little, but I preferred punching holes in paper and you

know that sort of thing. So I would say that would be my earliest recollection of making stuff.

Erik Wolken

Right. So you are an active maker. You liked to be involved in the making. You weren't a passive maker.

03:47 **Wendy Maruyama**

Right. Got to be more than just a piece of paper and crayons. I want to ...Even if it meant crumpling paper up or stabbing a piece of paper with a dowel rod, or...

Robb Helmkamp

Not just making marks but making holes in things too, changing the shape of it.

Wendy Maruyama

Ripping things apart. I remember needle craft stuff too. Like working with yarn and string. And of course you know back in the 50s the kinds of toys one would get would be very much based on gender and I never got the little hammers and the screwdriver kits for kids, you know. I got the sewing kit and the dolls and that kind of thing. So hopefully that changed a little bit now, but I do remember that pretty clearly because I would go to my cousin's house. I had male cousins and they all had the really cool cars (coins?). That wasn't made available to me because I guess mom felt like I needed more of a Homemaking Type Kit.

Erik Wolken

What was your first introduction and attraction to furniture and woodworking when did that come?

05:12 **Wendy Maruyama**

Well, you... if you want the earliest: I remember in 6th grade camp, we got sent away to some mountain retreat. When we were all in 6th grade and I really kind of hated it because I hate camping and I hate hiking. I am just not into the outdoor scene. But the most fun things I remember... we had to find a piece of wood in the woods and bring it back to craft room and sand it. Make it all pretty and put oil on it. And I remember the transformation of the wood once I sanded it and made it all pretty and put oil on it, kind of magical. I think my mom still has this piece of wood somewhere. I think I

saw it on her dresser a couple of years ago. But anyway, so that would be my earliest memory. But then my first piece of furniture happened when I was 19. I was taking a craft class at a junior college that was in San Diego called Southwestern College and they had an excellent craft program. And this would be the 70s and craft was really enjoying a huge revival at that time and so I was taking jewelry and ceramics. The craft class, we didn't really have a woodworking program, but we had a craft class, which introduced us to all sorts of things, like batik and textiles. And so that we did a little bit of ceramics and weaving and then woodworking was the final project and I was really intrigued by the fact that, you know, I was able to use the machines. And the other good thing was that the woman that was teaching class also made furniture. So kind of like wow, you know, Joanne can work in wood! You know, I'm going to learn how to work in wood. So anyway... I made a three legged chair that was really kind of organic, kind of poorly made, but I didn't know what I was doing. We didn't have any machines for doing mortise and tenon and she (Joanne) didn't use joinery in her work. It was kind of a California thing. We used a lot of dowels you know, and I think that was inspired by *Sam Maloof* who used a lot of dowels to fabricate his furniture and the dowels were decorative of course too. You know were you use contrasting woods with dowels. And back in those days, we were using a lot of leather so I had leather seat and it was uh pretty hippy influenced work. And its funny because I have the chair in my studio now and I want to replace the seat and maybe clean it up a little bit, you know. But anyway, that was my first piece of furniture. That would be 1971 maybe seven? Yeah '71.

Robb Helmkamp

That's great that you still have it.

Erik Wolken

You'll have to send us a picture of that piece. And if it was truly hippie Wendy, you would have macramé the seat

Wendy Maruyama

Oh, maybe.

09:26 **Erik Wolken**

Did you know who Sam Maloof was when you were 19?

09:30 **Wendy Maruyama**

Um. No I didn't actually. But you know looking back, I remember thinking, "Why did I use dowels?" Oh and it was screwed together. Screws and the dowels were really there too hide the screw head. Anyway, I didn't know Sam's work until I went to *San Diego State*. I transferred from Southwestern to San Diego State. Now Larry Hunter was my teacher there and he was the one who kind of exposed me to a lot of makers at the time. Wendell (Castle) well, of course, was a biggie and he had a huge influence on California woodworkers and we had some really amazing woodworkers in California too. *Larry Hunter* being one of them and *Jack Rogers Hopkins* who I think is greatly under appreciated for his work. He did some massive stack lamination pieces. Personally I think that he I think he was really the first person to really incorporate stack lamination into furniture. And I think that Wendell started using the same techniques, around the same time, but my feeling is that Jack was really the early pioneer for that method of working. One day I remember seeing a movie not a video, but it was a movie, you know we he had a movie of him building a music stand from start to finish. It was a much different method of construction and stack lamination. That movie was probably made in the late 60's, 67 maybe. But my main influence at that time was *Tommy Simpson*. I was really just wowed by Tommy's work at that time, you know? So sculptural. And it wasn't merely about woodworking, it was more about fantasy forms that one could make. I think all of his work was made with wood. But, I think could have been interpreted into Paper Mache, plaster, with the kind of forms he was creating with wood. And of course it was all painted. So my first piece of furniture that I did for *Larry Hunter* was a desk that was very inspired by *Tommy Simpson*. But it's all made out of chicken wire, plywood and Paper Mache.

Erik Wolken

And this was in a woodworking class you did that?

12:40 **Wendy Maruyama**

Yeah this was a woodworking class. And so I think maybe it was like an introduction and maybe I showed this piece and Larry might have said well it would be faster if you made it out of chicken wire and plywood. You know, you might be able to achieve the form more quickly. So maybe he was trying to you know encourage me to create that form with the little knowledge that I had in woodworking. It was beginning class so it's interesting how he let me do that. If I was teaching a beginning class, I

probably would not have said, "Oh make it out of Paper Mache." But uh in hindsight, I wish maybe I could have encouraged that. But, I think I was to deprogramed by the time I started teaching out. I had too many educators that, you know, dictated what woodworking should be and how it should be taught.

Erik Wolken

So what were those first what pieces you actually created for him like?

14:02 **Wendy Maruyama**

Well let me tell you, the assignments that I got were so totally different from what most of us are familiar with. And you have to remember this is the early 70's! One assignment was to go out into the woods and be with nature, look around and find something beautiful that was natural. And thinking about it now sounds so crazy. But anyway, so I found a seedpod out in the woods and decided to make a carved hand mirror that was inspired by this seedpod. But that was one assignment. And the second one, was um, I decided to make a music stand or a book stand and I wanted it to emulate a whales tail. You know, when a whale breaches in the ocean and it dives you see that beautiful tail coming out. Well the upper part of my bookstand had a lamp and the tail was really part of that lamp. You know, looking back I'm kind of glad I had those kinds of experiences when I was more naive and perhaps a little more open minded about what furniture could be. There were fewer limitations, if I remember, back in those days.

Robb Helmkamp

It's really neat to see you incorporating nature into your work already with the whale. I mean, how prescient is that about work that we're going to talk about later in the podcast. But, I think that was one of my most favorite things about living in California was being able to see the whales out in the ocean and go whale watching.

16:08 **Wendy Maruyama**

I agree. Talking about California after having been on the east coast for a while. And then coming back to California the plants are so different here, you know, just sort of otherworldly. The cactus, you know, even the more tropical looking plants that you see, the colors are so different. And I think that had a profound effect on my work. When I returned to California in the

in the 80's I really started splashing that paint around. Well, you know, I was free from the indoctrination of the east coast woodworking scene.

Robb Helmkamp

Ha ha ha ha

Erik Wolken

Let's keep on moving on. And let's talk about ***Mickey Mackintosh***. I think that's the first piece that I saw. Was that the first piece you saw Robb?

Robb Helmkamp

I think it was. When I started at Haywood Community College. My teacher Wayne Rabb talked about and presented some of your work in his slideshows. I remember seeing Mickey Macintosh and just being blown away. You know, not initially, not knowing what to think, but then reading into it and finding out the story behind it. And, you know, I think I tried to make up my own story about it when I first saw it,

Erik Wolken

So what is the story behind ***Mickey Mackintosh***?

17:37 **Wendy Maruyama**

That was made in 1980 or 1981 and I had just graduated from *RIT, Rochester Institute of Technology*. And I was free, gleefully, free from school and from assignments and the watchfull eyes of *Bill Keyser* and *Doug Sigler*. I felt like I could do anything I really wanted. So I decided that I have always loved *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* chairs. I love the tall back chairs, and I loved Disneyland as a kid. Any opportunity I could get to and get Mom and Dad to take me to Disneyland was just heaven and one of my favorite memories was having one of those Mickey Mouse hats where you would have the big black mouse ears. I think I have an old picture of me wearing that. I thought to myself that would interesting to mash up the two things into one piece. So I said why not and I wanted to take two iconic images and put it into one piece. And that's how ***Mickey Mackintosh*** was born. I know a lot of people didn't love it, think of it back in the 80's. I showed that piece at *Pritam and Eames* in '82 or '83 and it never sold and then it went to another gallery. 30 years later now there has been a lot of interest in the chairs and I have sold so many of them just in the last 10 years. And so I had established there would be an edition of 25 starting in 1981 and so slowly have been pumping out the chairs over the last 40

years, and I just finished the last 10 of the edition which is now in New York City at *R and Company Gallery*.

Robb Helmkamp

When you first came up with the idea were you trying to achieve a mash up?

20:20 **Wendy Maruyama**

I hate making chairs okay. I really hate them. Even now I've tried to make chairs and I keep coming up with the same shtick for years. You know it just is hard to break out of that ubiquitous chair form, with 4 legs and slats and a seat and I kept drawing it over and over and over again and I just couldn't make any progress. And then I was drinking coffee and I put the coffee cup down and it made like a ring on top of my drawing and I thought oh my God that is perfect. So I am going to put those ears and that is how that happened you know.

Robb Helmkamp

That's perfect!

Wendy Maruyama

It just worked out, it just looked so good, it was the first time I can say oh I loved that piece. I usually don't brag a lot about my work and say oh this is a piece I made I love it's an amazing piece it's the ***Mickey Mackintosh Chair***. That doesn't happen very often you know.

Erik Wolken

Do you have the original drawing with a coffee cup stain?

Erik Wolken

One more question about the ***Mickey Mackintosh*** chair. You use that industrial Zolotone finish? Was that inspired by the coffee stain as well?

21:45 **Wendy Maruyama**

You Know, there's not a lot of resources in Smithville Tennessee, there was an auto body supply store on the main drag there, that's the first time I saw a can of um I guess it's called Zolotone. I think it was called splatter paint or truck paint. I think it was made by Napa and it was black with little red and blue speckles. And thought it was the perfect color combination for ***Mickey***

Mackintosh. You stepped back and you saw that basically a black chair but if you walked up very close to it you not only saw the red and the blue but you felt the texture. It was smooth. That is how I came up with that surface. It was just serendipity that I came across that paint. Interestingly around the same time one of my colleagues at that time who was *Ed Zucca* had also discovered that same paint but he was using it in a very different way.

Erik Wolken

Actually, one more thing about the I lied, I'm gonna ask one more question about the Mickey Mackintosh chair. Why do you think the chair wasn't accepted in the 80s but was much was accepted much later?

23:25 **Wendy Maruyama**

I don't really know. I mean, I wish I knew because it was the coolest thing I thought, but it wasn't the price I remember how cheap it was, I sold the first few ones for 500 bucks that's basically almost the cost of materials. But you know, nowadays, but I guess maybe because it sort of had a vintage reference to it, it just became iconic over the years. I think it took a couple of museums to highlight it. I think um it really helps when a museum supports your work and that more people would notice it. I think one of the first museums to acquire this piece was the *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London and *Glenn Adamson* was the curator back then and he was creating a show about post modernism which of course this took place in the 80's. And so it was just sheer luck that Glenn wanted to utilize that chair for the collection and pushed it. Actually he pushed it from somebody else who bought it for hardly anything, and then like sold it for like a butt load of money. But I finally got my due after a bunch of... I was able to sell those chairs at a fair price, shortly after that. I hate talking about money, anyway.

Robb Helmkamp

It's kind of neat to see that they have a life that is now on to almost 42 plus years.

Wendy Maruyama

Yeah.

Robb Helmkamp

So you said you just made 10 More of them for the fall? What's it like making a piece after 42 years and I know you have made them, you know, on the way but 42 years after the first one. That's great.

25:50 **Wendy Maruyama**

Yeah. It's interesting because I've been invited to participate in a chair show here in San Diego. I was, oh God... I don't even know why I said yes. But I said yes. And I was back at the same place drawing the same stick chair over and over and over again. So finally just out of necessity I had to stop and I started ripping from three quarter inch square cherry stock and started making what looks like a ladder making a ladder but it's actually a ladder with the a little chair stuck on the bottom and the foot rail I made what looks like little mouse ears sitting at the top just because I needed to get it done you know, but it came out kind of cute. I mean it's cute. So I call it **Matador** because it looks like a little matador hat you know those little hats that bullfighters wear. That's kind of like a offshoot of **Mickey Mackintosh** in a way. Maybe I am doomed to that kind of chair design?

Robb Helmkamp

I wouldn't call it doom. I mean, it's almost iconic now that you... you know, you know that you can incorporate that shape to your chairs.

Wendy Maruyama

It's doom, It's doom, I'm doomed.

Robb Helmkamp

Ah it's not Doom!

Wendy Maruyama

I love that word "DOOMED"

Robb Helmkamp

It's a good word.

Erik Wolken

I think your next piece ought to be called "*Mickey Macintosh Doomed*" And you can riff off of that idea.

Wendy Maruyama

Yeah.

Erik Wolken

Maybe Mickey's ears fall off? So moving along past Mickey and through time. There is a wonderful episode of you on the Craft in America Series on PBS. And it is the Identity episode. And I think you do a wonderful job in that episode of explaining all of your different identities. And I was just sort of hoping that you would go back and sort of rehash that little piece for us?

28:03 Wendy Maruyama

Well you know... I was born with a hearing deficiency, I am about 80% deaf and I also have cerebral palsy, which has not really limited me too much, but it does affect my motor control. So you know, as much as I didn't like that identity over the years, in the last 10 years maybe, I started to learn to embrace that identity. In the past I tried to ignore it. And not think about it so much. Then I realized maybe it was not a good idea because people may find it noticeable and I should be up front about it so that people maybe would feel less uncomfortable with hearing me or seeing me for the first time. And if I can embrace that I think it makes it easier for other people to embrace it as well. That is my theory anyway. And then there's the Asian identity. I probably didn't even know I was Asian until grade school. When people were asking me if I was Chinese or Japanese. I would go home and ask Mom, "Are we Chinese or Japanese?" or they would ask me if Dad knew how to do Judo. And you know that kind of thing and that's when I realized they were kind of, being Asian was, was a thing. And then of course I identify as being a maker that's a huge one for me. I am very proud to be a maker, I am very proud to be a crafts person and I am fortunate that I have that too. I guess it's kind of a form of therapy, maybe? I don't know what I would do without that skill. You know? Anyway, so those are my identities that you know some are less obvious than others, and oh being a woman, that's another one

Robb Helmkamp

And so on being a woman, you were one of the very first women to graduate with a master's in furniture and design from RIT.

30:54 Wendy Maruyama

Kind of hard to believe! I can't even believe that's the big deal now, you know, but yeah I guess. There are plenty of other students female students

in the program, but they were undergrads. And when they said, you know, you and *Gail Smith (Gail Fredell)* are going to be the first MFA students to graduate from RIT. I was like wow, you know, ok.

Robb Helmkamp

So what does this mean?

Wendy Maruyama

I don't know. Who cares anyway?

Robb Helmkamp

Yeah, that's... a that's a great attitude to have about it. Yeah, it's like you are being an iconoclast without knowing it.

31:48 **Wendy Maruyama**

Maybe that's a good way to put it. No, I was not really aware of that. And it was really funny because after I graduated there was kind of a slew of exhibitions that were called "woman woodworkers" and "women in wood". I guess that was a good thing? I know that a lot of other woman woodworkers feel kind of ambivalent about that, and I could understand that. I mean you want to be accepted as a woodworker regardless of whether your male or female. On the other hand you want to sort of prove something. I'm happy to be able to represent to put it that way. But I don't want it to be the only thing that kind of identifies my work I want to be acknowledged for what I can do and what I like to do. I suppose that would be a hard discussion in itself?

Erik Wolken

This is the end of part 1 of our discussion with Wendy Maruyama. Please make sure to listen to part 2 as well