



massachusetts artist niho kozuru transforms an everyday material into vivid sculptural pieces inspired by new england's unique architecture.

RUBBER SOUL

TEXT BY CHRISTINE TEMIN | PORTRAIT BY WEBB CHAPPELL

The setting is quintessentially New England: white clapboard farmhouse, green shutters, red barn, old-fashioned water pump in the front yard, a pond out back. The Topsfield, Massachusetts, property looks like a Winslow Homer. Niho Kozuru, the young Japanese woman whose studio is in that picturesque barn, works in a medium Homer never would have considered, though: rubber.



Kozuru, whose family moved to New England from Japan in 1980 when she was eleven, is quickly making a name for herself in Boston art circles and beyond. In 2004 she was chosen for the Institute of Contemporary Art's "Vita Brevis" series of temporary public art in historic locations. Her installation at the Paul Revere House in Boston's North End was extremely well received by both critics and public, bringing her the broadest audience she'd had to date. She has shown her work at Gallery NAGA on Boston's Newbury Street and had a highly successful show last fall at Boston Sculptors Gallery in the city's South End.

Rubber might sound mundane but in her hands it turns into objects of uncommon beauty. Kozuru uses translucent rubber in rich hues—amber and red are particular favorites—that take on a fiery glow when backlit or placed against a window that gets good sunlight.

Kozuru looks to the architectural details of New England homes for inspiration. She scours antique shops and

THIS PAGE: Kozuru favors rich, fiery colors. **TOP:** *Balusters*, 2002, 20" × 2", \$900. **BOTTOM:** *The Rising*, 2005, 92" on a 26.5" square base, \$10,000

TOP: PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD GODA; BOTTOM: PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT D. PERACHIO



PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT D. PERACHIO

flea markets to find the finials, balusters, doorknobs and newel posts that give the houses their character, and in them she has found part of herself—almost literally, sometimes. One long, vertical piece she made by creating rubber casts of architectural ornaments is the exact length of her spine. Another of her works is a cast of the side of her own leg. In its hollow interior she pressed casts of finials. “They’re the bone structure,” she explains, “metaphors for my support.”

The pieces based on her own body date from a few years ago. Nowadays she’s experimenting with larger struc-

tures that can go outdoors and hold their own in the landscape. “The direction of my current work is reconfigured architectural elements,” she notes. “I’m in a research and development phase, to find the best and most durable materials for these pieces.”

But she hasn’t abandoned rubber. *The Rising Column*, which she made last year, is an example of her newer, more imposing works. At more than ten and a half feet tall, the curvaceous, vivid red vertical is twice her height.

While her earlier work replicated single architectural details, the *Column*’s composition comes from four

Kozuru sometimes uses her own body for inspiration. *Amber Spine*, 2005, 25" × 8" × 3", \$4,500

giant antique urns. Its fifteen separate sections weigh about 350 pounds apiece and are held together by a steel pole running through the center. *The Rising Column* literally takes Kozuru’s art to new heights and in a different direction, less intimate and whimsical than her earlier style.

Kozuru started her career not in rubber (“Rubber 101” doesn’t grace the catalogs of many art schools) but in the more traditional media of metal and glass. She studied at the Parsons School of Design in New York, where she earned a BFA in 1991. Her studio still holds pieces of her sand-cast glass, their gritty exteriors protecting gleaming, jewel-like interiors. Glass, she says, requires cumbersome equipment, including a furnace, and typically involves teamwork. Rubber allows her to work on her own, in that lovely studio with its wide-board pine floors and old barn doors that she opens when the weather is warm.

It was, ironically, a sojourn in Hawaii that led to her interest in New England architecture. In 1998 she headed to Honolulu for graduate school. There she encountered Mission House, a building that was shipped board by board from Boston in 1821, so the missionaries could have a “civilized” place to live. “I realized in Hawaii how much of New England there is in me,” she says. “It made me understand where I was coming from.”

In the five years since her return, she’s amassed a studio’s worth of scraps of architecture, ornaments whose origins she often doesn’t know. They’ve been removed from their original settings, just as she has. “I’m interested in the history of furniture,” she says, “but it’s also the shapes that attract me. The pieces I use are all turned wood, and wood turning has similarities to throwing clay.”

Clay is Kozuru’s heritage: her father, Gen Kozuru, is celebrated in Japan for his ceramic art. He has his own studio at



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Candles 5" to 7.5", \$35 to \$55; Six Panel Door, 2003, 78" x 24" x 3", \$6,500; Longfellow Balustrade Columns, 2004, 60", \$9,000



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PHOTOGRAPHY BY CLAUDE JAYNES; CLAUDE JAYNES; ROBERT D. PERACHIO

the Topsfield farm, where he works for a large part of the year.

In addition to her rubber sculpture, Kozuru makes candles, which are sold at Good on Charles Street in Boston, and in the Institute of Contemporary Art gift shop on Boylston Street. Like her rubber pieces, her pure beeswax candles are based on architectural details and come in fifteen shapes and several sizes. The largest burns for 350 hours, although they're so attractive in their pristine state that it's hard to imagine actually lighting them. The candles cost \$35 to \$150; the rubber sculptures go for between \$500 and \$15,000, depending on their size and complexity.

A relentless experimenter with a restless mind, Kozuru is currently auditioning new materials, including plaster and fiberglass, for her large works, and she hasn't ruled out a return to glass.

A sense of humor is a Kozuru family trait. Among Niho Kozuru's smaller works are rubber versions of those gelatin desserts made in scalloped metal molds. The translucency of the rubber and its wiggly quality make it a dead ringer for the real thing. If one of these works were slipped onto a buffet table, someone would surely go at it with a spoon.

Much as she considers herself a New Englander, she still carries a Japanese passport and retains her father's obviously Japanese name rather than adopting that of her husband, graphic designer Jeffrey Hayes. And if you look really closely at the exterior of the Kozurus' picture-perfect New England house, you might notice one detail that hints at their identity. Instead of the traditional kind of sign that says "so-and-so homestead" is one that says "Hajimestead." "Hajime" is another way of reading the Japanese character that is Gen Kozuru's first name. **NEH**

EDITOR'S NOTE To see Niho Kozuru's work, visit her Web site at www.nihokozuru.com.