

HOME&DESIGN

Furniture maker Mira Nakashima has come into her own style, though it's rooted, like her famous father's, in the essence of the wood.



About 200 people attended the opening at Moderne Gallery in Old City of "Nakashima Woodworkers: An Evolving Legacy." MICHAEL J. JONIEC

With the grain

By Alexandra Jaffe
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Standing exactly five feet tall, Mira Nakashima is dwarfed by the towering planks in the woodshed once used by her father, celebrated furniture maker George Nakashima.

Similarly, his legacy — and the renown that has only grown since his death in 1990 — often has overshadowed her work as a craftswoman.

Yet over a 43-year career, Nakashima, 71, has come into her own style without forgetting her roots. What unites her work with her father's is the essence of the wood.

"Same woodpile, same techniques," says Nakashima, as she sits in her New Hope studio. "We just use them in different ways sometimes. ... That's the beauty of handmade furniture. It's not all the same."

This idea is the driving force behind the exhibition of her latest 30-piece collection,

"Nakashima Woodworkers: An Evolving Legacy," now at the Moderne Gallery in Old City through Nov. 2.

The gallery, which has hosted seven Nakashima exhibitions since 1989, holds the largest selection of vintage "Georges" in the country — owner Robert Aibel is a Nakashima expert and a close friend of the family.

"We collaborated from the get-go, right after Dad was See **MIRA** on D4



Concordia Chairs and 3 Music Stands
by Mira Nakashima.

CHRISTIAN GIANELLI



Widdicomb sofa

CHRISTIAN GIANELLI

An evolving legacy in wood

MIRA from D1 gone," says Nakashima. "[Robert] knows a lot about Nakashima, and he's got a really good eye for what's real and what isn't" — a useful skill as an increasing number of "knockoff-ashimas" creep into the market.

Aibel also can tell the subtle difference between the work of daughter — architectural and geometric — and father — more organic in design.

The show at Moderne, which saw 200 people at its opening last month, is the first to credit the whole team of studio woodworkers who collaborate on the pieces, including Nakashima's right-hand woman Miriam Carpenter, whom she calls "more than an apprentice."

"It is a time in [Mira's] life when she is ready to showcase not just her work, but the work of the other people in the studio," Aibel says.

Nakashima is quick to point out that it has always been a group effort, even when her father was alive. "When Dad first died, the press put out this myth that George Nakashima was making everything with his own two hands," she says. "Everyone thought that he made it all himself." She laughs. "Superman!"

In reality, even when her father was in charge, there were about eight woodworkers in the studio, a number that has now grown to 10. "Dad had a very different personality than me," Nakashima says.



Mira Nakashima and gallery owner Robert Aibel at the opening of "Nakashima Woodworkers: An Evolving Legacy" in Old City. The show ends Nov. 2. MICHAEL J. JONIEC

"He probably wouldn't admit he received a lot of suggestions and help from the men in the shop."

Perhaps that's a reflection of the self-sufficient way the elder Nakashima fell into his craft. In 1941 he was working part time as a furniture maker and an architect in Seattle, when the Nakashima family was relocated to an internment camp in Idaho. His daughter, only 6 weeks old at the time, was told about the experience: "He met a Japanese carpenter and worked with him to help make our barracks more livable. He developed a fair amount of movable furniture that was dual-purpose because our barracks rooms were pretty small."

After the camp, Nakashima's family started fresh in Pennsylvania, where her father established himself as a talented woodworker. When Nakashima reached

college age, her father encouraged her to pursue two degrees in architecture, as he had done, setting the stage to eventually draw her into the family business.

In 2008, President Obama's decorator commissioned from her a coffee table for the White House family room. "I styled it after our peace altar. I thought that would be appropriate in the White House," she says. If the president enjoys putting his feet up on her work to watch the game, Nakashima is none the wiser: "I never met him!"

Despite having a design of her own at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Nakashima doesn't often dwell on her status as an artist. "I think a lot of designers get swelled heads about what they can do and what their fame is and what their name means," she says.

"Just from my own experience, once you start thinking about fame and fortune and so forth, it's all over."

Yet Nakashima, the only person her father ever trained, is still guided by his legendary work.

"That's the litmus test," says Aibel. "Are these pieces emerging from the design legacy of George Nakashima, or are they going off in another direction? ... Her goal has always been to maintain the aesthetic and spiritual legacy of the work."

After hours at the workshop, Nakashima walks through the empty studio, touching each piece softly, quietly fretting about a patch of rotten wood. She makes her way to the showroom, where, resting on a beautiful desk from her 2009 collection, is an ornamental branch of bitterbrush, a token tribute from the internment camp in Idaho.

"He was guided by divine inspiration," Nakashima says of her father. "But that's a tough act to follow. When he died, I thought, those are huge footsteps, I don't know if I can walk in those or not."

Aibel says she has. She does.

And yet, Nakashima isn't sure how much longer she will lead the operation — another reason the exhibition emphasizes that the work is not that of just one person.

"At this point in my life," she says, "I have to think about what's coming next."

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