



Installation view of "Crooked Pencils," Rio Kobayashi's solo exhibition at the Kate MacGarry gallery in East London. The artist, designer and maker is showcasing furniture and sculptural works crafted from salvaged materials. (Photo by Angus Mill, courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry)

ARTS

Rio Kobayashi bends the rules of design

Japanese Austrian artist's creations celebrate playfulness and sustainability

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December 9, 2025 08:00 JST

LONDON -- Tufts of boar hair sprout from the backrest of a wooden chair like pigtails on a child. Repaired and transformed by London-based Japanese Austrian artist, designer and maker Rio Kobayashi, the chair is functional again, yet now carries an odd, zoomorphic charm. "I want each one to be loved," Kobayashi says when asked why his pieces often resemble animals or people. "Like you've gained a new pet or something, they're to be cherished."

His "Bosa Bosa Chairs," named after the Japanese word for a disheveled, bedhead look, feature in his solo show "Crooked Pencils" at the Kate MacGarry gallery in East London from Nov. 15 to Dec. 20. The exhibition focuses on furniture and sculptural works crafted from salvaged materials, but pencils bend, perch and creep across the gallery, for sale at prices starting at 1 penny and rising exponentially. The opening night turned into a frenzy, with one crooked pencil reaching a three-figure sum. "It's like dodgy accounting," Kobayashi laughs. "I like irregularities and imperfections."

He cites the Latin phrase *Manus Manum Lavat* (one hand washes the other), hinting at collaboration tinged with mischief, which was the title of his 2023 show at Cromwell Place, London, where he debuted the artwork "Hand Soap," a bar of soap in the shape of a hand, referencing the title of the show and made in collaboration with Walde Seifen, Austria's oldest soap factory.

Kobayashi's subversiveness sits alongside an eagerness to connect with others. "I'm not an all-rounder. I need help from people with different skill sets," he says. "I like to mention everyone who works with me." The bright posters welcoming visitors to his latest show, for instance, are a collaboration with the graphic design collective Abake. "I told them almost nothing, just the dates and title. They're actually giant stickers."

Gallery owner MacGarry says she has followed Kobayashi's work for several years. "You could describe Rio as a furniture designer, but he's more than that: He works with the freedom of a conceptual artist," she says. "I've always been interested in the crossover between craft, design and art."



Top left: Kobayashi's "Bosa Bosa Chair 4" (2025) -- one of the works on display at the "Crooked Pencils" exhibition. Top right: A poster welcoming visitors to the show. (Photos by Angus Mill, courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry) Bottom: The Manis Manum Lavat hand soap that Kobayashi made in collaboration with Walde Seifen, Austria's oldest soap factory. (Courtesy of Rio Kobayashi Studio)

The opening of his show coincided with London Art+Climate Week, mounted by 29 museums and galleries from Nov. 12 to Nov. 16 -- a fitting alignment given Kobayashi's dedication to recycling and repairing. His "Ghost" series repurposes dismantled architectural elements from a Victorian town house purchased by interior designer Irenie Cossey: Reclaimed doors, shelving and fireplaces become a bench, a chair, a table, each embedded with new wood, glass, metal, stickers and even motor-vehicle plates that signal "speed."

Another work, "Nio," turns a discarded walnut-veneered cabinet into a sculptural eruption. The faces of two guardian deities seem to emerge from the veneer's grain, their gilded mouths extended by wiggly metal elements that serve as tongues. "Nio" refers to the fearsome gatekeeping gods of Japanese temples, one mouth open, one closed, symbolizing "a" and "un," the first and last sounds of the Japanese syllabary. On the back, Kobayashi has written the two characters in *shodo* (calligraphy); he dismisses praise, noting that he corrected his strokes in red ink "like a teacher would." For him, imperfection is inspiration.

Kobayashi credits a "network of grandmas" in Austria for helping him to secure an apprenticeship at Wetscher, a furniture company in Fugen, near his grandmother's home. "At 18, I was already a bit old to start," he says. "Most begin at 16, but I was ready. They gave me lots of responsibility."





Top: Kobayashi in his East London studio. (Photo by Yuki Sumner) Bottom left: "Nio" (2025), one of the pieces on view at "Crooked Pencils," turns a discarded walnut-veneered cabinet into a sculptural eruption. Bottom right: A detail of "Nio" showing two sets of hiragana characters, the original in black and a "corrected" version in red, as a calligraphy teacher might use to demonstrate proper form. (Photos by Angus Mill, courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry)

After three years he moved to Berlin, then settled in London with a brief sojourn in Paris in between, working closely with designers and artists, such as Georg Oehler, Taro Izumi and Martino Gamper, and eventually founding his own studio in 2017. Now 36 and fluent in Japanese, German and English, he has received multiple awards, including Design Miami's Best Curio Presentation (2024) and London Design Festival's Emerging Design Medal (2025).

Kobayashi's lack of formal design education seems to have liberated him, allowing him to move fluidly between craft, design and art. "Call me what you want," he shrugs. He was raised near Mashiko, a famed pottery town in Tochigi prefecture, north of Tokyo. His father is the ceramic artist Shirobey Kobayashi and his Austrian Italian mother is a gilding specialist who settled in rural Japan after meeting his father in India. "My parents told me you don't need to go to school -- you learn from life," Kobayashi says. "The most important thing is to say thank you and be grateful."

He attended a local technical high school, "a school for *yanki* (delinquents)," he says affectionately, studying civil engineering. He planned to attend design college but after learning his family could not afford it, decided instead to move to Austria.



"Turning Into Shelf (Original)," 2025. Kobayashi's playful pencils can also be seen on the work. (Photo by Angus Mill, courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry)

If sustainability runs through his work, it comes from necessity rather than ideology. His family built their home from salvaged materials with the help of skilled friends, he says. "They didn't have money, but they had everything else," Kobayashi adds. "People helped because it was fun." As a child, he helped with construction, and if he wanted a Lego set, he was told to make one.

The Japanese word *mottainai*, which conveys a sense of regret over waste, captures the ethos that Kobayashi now renders playful and desirable. Photographer Angus Mill and artist Anne Hardy, a couple, once asked him to fix a side table; after talking, they realized they needed a shelf instead. The table returned transformed into a bat-like creature, which hangs upside-down like a bat in their London home. "With Rio, you never know what you'll get back," Mill says.

Kobayashi's first works were a chair and a stool: "Mikadokun" and "Mikadochan." Both draw on the European pick-up-sticks game Mikado, in which the highest-value stick -- colored blue -- is called the "Mikado," a word that once signified the emperor of Japan. Kobayashi leans into this cultural tangle, adding the Japanese honorifics, "*kun*" and "*chan*," the suffixes used for young men as well as boys and girls.

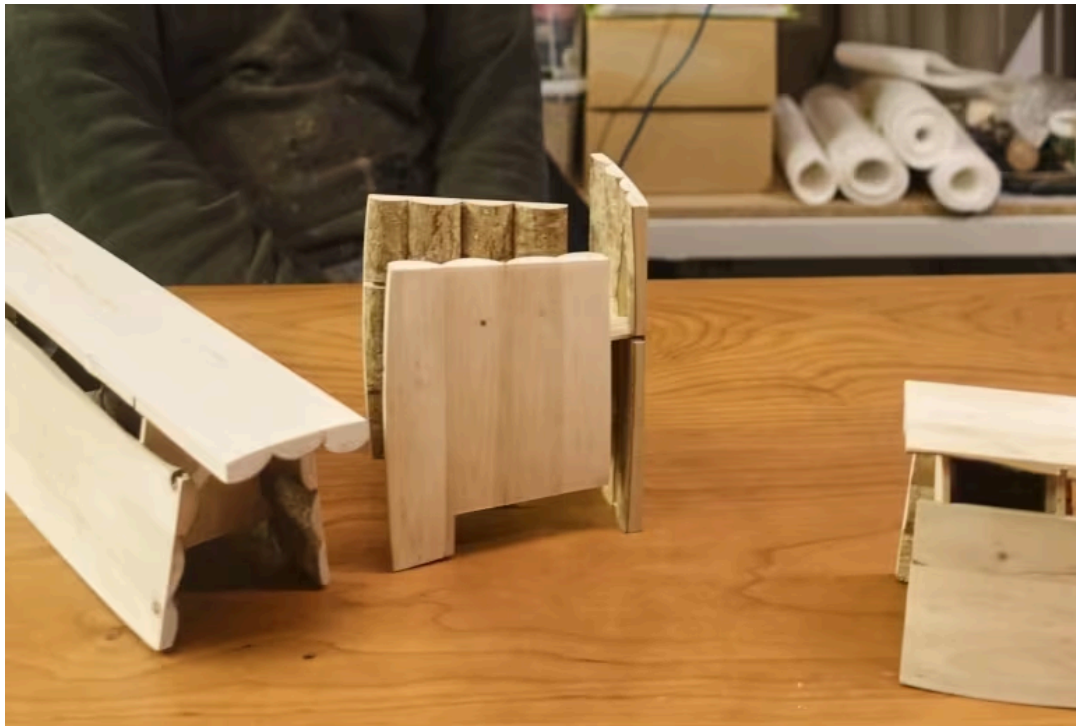


Top: "Bat Shelf" (2023) was a side table in a former life, but Kobayashi reimagined it as a bat-like object to be hung on a wall. (Photo by Angus Mill) Bottom: The "Mikadochan" stool and "Mikadokun" chair from the artist's 2017 Mikado Collection. (Photo by James Harris)

"The rounded legs [of the chair and stool] taper like the sticks in the game. They share the same colors and stripes. It's tricky to make, but they're sturdy," he says. "I wanted to recreate that sense of tension you get playing Mikado -- but also, more honestly, I wanted to make fun of the game. I enjoy all the cliches of Eastern and Western cultures. I'm half-Austrian and half-Japanese, so maybe I'm one of the few people who can play with those cliches without hurting anyone's feelings."

Kobayashi's playful sensibility carries over into his latest undertaking in Tokyo, where he is part of the second phase of A Tree Project, led by Tokyo studio Daikei Mills to be unveiled in mid-December. Six international designers, including Fabien Cappello, Max Lamb, Faye Toogood, Siin Siin and KUO DUO, have each received a single 20-meter Yoshino cedar tree, its wood dense from centuries-old cultivation methods, to create furniture for the atrium at Ginza Six, a luxury shopping complex in Tokyo. In Kobayashi's East London studio, mock-ups show three pieces: an armchair, a rocking stool and a long rocking bench. "Maybe this bench will help solve Japan's declining birthrate," he jokes.

His "Inside Out" series uses material that is typically discarded when timber is cut. The remaining timber will be used for Phase Three, a temporary pop-up structure at Ginza Six -- perhaps similar in concept to his "Off the Shelf Pavilion," built with Webb Yates for the London Design Festival in 2024 from standardized timber and designed to be assembled and disassembled without damage.



Top: Mock-ups of three pieces of furniture Kobayashi is creating for his "Inside Out" series, which uses material typically discarded when timber is cut. (Photo by Yuki Sumner) Bottom: "Off the Shelf Pavilion," built for the London Design Festival in 2024, is designed to be assembled and disassembled without damage. (Photo by James Harris)

Kobayashi is also showcasing new work with Blunk Space at the FOG Design+Art Fair in San Francisco in mid-January. He says his long-term dream is to buy disused farmland near his family home in Japan and create a sculpture park, a pond, a restaurant, a workshop and a gallery.

"I don't know how I'll do it. I always seem to have only about 2,000 pounds (\$2,660) in my bank account!" he laughs. But given his lifelong ethos of mutual support, it would not be surprising if his dream one day takes shape.

Yuki Sumner is a contributing writer.