

## Two of Our Favorite Woodworkers on Apprenticeships, Supportive Grandmas, and Learning the Rules So You Can Break Them

by Deborah Shapiro

Rio Kobayashi and Luke Malaney each make sculptural furniture that exists somewhere between art, design, and carpentry. They're pieces that serve a function but at the same time question function: What should an object actually do? Where does its purpose lie? It's a blurry line — or maybe not even a line at all. Both designers exhibit their pieces with fine art galleries: Malaney with Objective Gallery, and soon at Marc Straus; Kobayashi, for his part, had a show at Blunk Space earlier this year and currently has another in the works with London's Kate MacGarry.

While they come from different backgrounds — Malaney is originally a Long Islander who lives in Brooklyn, while Kobayashi grew up in Japan and is currently based in London — they've arrived at a distinctively similar style and approach. Neither went to school for art or design but learned their skills through apprenticeships. And while their furniture-making practices are grounded in woodworking traditions, they both use that base of knowledge to go in new directions guided by intuition. Their work shares a playful and imaginative spirit, combined with a respect for longevity and integrity — objects that are well-made but also driven by curiosity, inventiveness, and experimentation. We suspected they'd have a lot to talk about — spoiler: they did! — so we wanted to introduce them and see where the conversation led.

[This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.]

SU: I thought I'd start by asking about an aspect your work has in common: using wood as a primary material. Rio, I know you work in a lot of other materials. But wood is such a warm, organic, natural material. What draws you to it?

Luke: In my mid-20s, I was working for an old-time woodworker as an apprentice. He was a crazy old dude from Rome. He came over to the States in his late thirties and started his own shop. I learned pretty much everything I know through him, working under him for four or five years. But during that time, I was kind of burned out and wanted an adventure, so I quit my job and sought to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail, which was a six-month journey through the woods. During that time, I acquired this deep respect for nature. Wood has always been my go-to when it comes to materials; it's the base that I build off of. It's hard for me to get away from wood. Right now, I'm working on this fireplace sculpture installation piece and it's a lot of cherry and there's different sections where I want to put an inlay or I have to change this or that because of the grain — it kind of tells me what to do in certain ways. It's nice being familiar with the material I'm working with, to dive a little deeper into it. It's a pleasure to work with.

Rio: Nice. Luke, did you go to Blunk Space for a residency?

Luke: No. I saw you just had a show there. That work was awesome.

Rio: Thank you so much. I was just curious. Because through this [conversation set-up] I discovered your work and it's really, really beautiful.

Luke: Thank you. I feel the same way about your work. It's really impressive, really thought out. I saw that recent table you did with a salvaged door. It was kind of wild and really cool.

Rio: I like to think that that work was well thought out, but it was so much about problem-solving. I just had this idea of putting a door like this but it didn't work and then I had to put glass on top, but it didn't work because it's tipping, so you know, then it became this piece and people are like, Wow this detail is crazy, How do you come up with it? I just solved a problem, I don't know! It's intuitive work. I didn't have a plan. It kind of evolved while I was making it.

Luke: I completely relate to that. We have that in common. We just kind of wing it and fall back on our skills that we've learned over the years to make sure it gets a pass to get let out in the world.





Rio: So, my background is woodworking. My father is a ceramic artist in Japan. I grew up in Japan. My mother is Austrian, from Tyrol, between Austria and Italy. My parents moved into the countryside of Japan and built their own house. There was a kiln and lots of things that they made by themselves. I recently discovered a picture of myself around 7 or 8 years old, planing a plank of wood, to make it a certain thickness so they could build a house or something. So, I was helping already. Making things was so close to me. I kept doing things where I could make things. It was probably the only thing I could do in my profession. [Laughs]. But I also had this idea to become a furniture designer one day. I moved to Austria after school when I was 18, to visit my grandmother. And I realized I had citizenship, so I could stay longer and my grandmother was like, If your passion is furniture design, why don't you start making furniture with a company and do an apprenticeship?

SU: Encouraging grandma — so nice!

Rio: Her grandma network was very strong in Austria. So, I was working for a company, doing an apprenticeship, and I learned how to do really fine, precise craftsmanship with a huge team, like 50 people. It was very industrialized. Making tables for super high-end clients all over the world. I did that for three years and it's really interesting because how I learned woodworking was so traditional and precise. Like, This is the way it should be, there's a reason why you use the wood in this direction.

Luke: Sure.

Rio: Because something's going to happen afterward and the wood warps. There's a whole reason for it. And I learned it really properly. And then I moved to Berlin, to Paris, to Tokyo. I came to London to work with a friend for Design Week in Milan and I had this idea of how design furniture should be, and I think my friend got annoyed, like, Why don't you just showcase your own work. But he supported it and so then it all



happened. But through working with other people in different categories making and designing a lot of stuff, I kind of experienced that if it's an "artwork," it doesn't need to be made how furniture should be made.

Luke: Exactly. Rules are made to be broken.

Rio: Totally. I was struggling because I just wanted to make something really nice, like functioning furniture. But then I started to think, how could this be more interesting? How could I break the tradition in a way that still works? How to reinterpret or rethink in a modern way. Because the tradition has been there for many hundreds of years. A hundred years ago the way they dried the wood was different than nowadays.

Luke: Yeah, it's all air dried.

Rio: It's more controlled, it doesn't really warp too much. And then also, I was helping Martino Gamper, a designer based in London, for two or three years in his practice, and he had lots of different ways of working with wood. Most of it was, like, kind of taboo. But he made it work. And I got really inspired. That's kind of the whole journey that I took. And now I'm doing these works where I go in different directions, but I used wood primarily because I thought it was the easiest way to make a piece for myself. It's reasonable, I didn't need to communicate with anyone else, I could just make a piece and show it. It was kind of the easiest way for me.

Luke: My use of the traditions, I learned a very similar way. It was very perfectionist, everything had to be precise. Everything we did at Raimo's shop, he was on my ass a lot. And I'm stubborn sometimes.

Rio: Older woodworkers! [Laughs]

Luke: Yeah. [Laughs]. You know, certain things are a no-no with woodwork, but I feel like because we both learned [woodworking] in that traditional way, we know how to stretch the boundaries. Because if we don't, there can't be much growth in our work. We have to break loose and be like, Well, I'm gonna put this piece here and see how it holds up.

Rio: It's really interesting because it's breaking the rules in a certain way — which is already kind of exciting, breaking a rule — but it's more like you try to think what's possible without having tradition telling you what to do.

Luke: It's more true to you, you know? I read that you didn't study design, and neither did I, and I'm kind of glad I didn't. Like you said, there's a certain way to do things, but I feel like that limits a lot of people. And I'm not in debt from design school.

Rio: It's an interesting thing, because I worked with Mariah [Nielson, director of the JB Blunk Estate and Blunk Space] at Blunk Space. She represents artists and then she does a show, a two-person show, with a fine artist and a craftsperson. Her father is JB Blunk.

Luke: JB Blunk is amazing.

Rio: He did ceramic works, functional objects, stools, tables at the intersection of art and design. When I had a show, I went there and created those pieces.

Luke: Oh, you made 'em over there.

Rio: Yeah, at the house. They have a shop and you can be dusty as much as you want because it's in the middle of the forest and no one cares. And then we did the show, and the way it was perceived, like, my work fell more on the art side. And it's interesting because at the beginning I was feeling a little bit — not necessarily guilt, but a weird feeling that I couldn't really show this one to my furniture-making colleagues. They'd be like, What is this?

It has this other value now. It's so strange in a way. It's totally breaking the rule from the furniture-making side. But from the art-side, it's a really well made art work.

SU: Do you think you have to know the rules in order to break them? That you do need to have a certain level of expertise and craftsmanship in order to deviate?



Rio: I think it helps.

Luke: If you don't, it's just harder to move forward with whatever piece you're trying to do. And you know what rules are worse to break than others.

SU: And you both produce work that's sculptural but functional as well, that needs to hold together.

Luke: I kind of like to keep it open. Like what Rio was saying — my work can be perceived as furniture by one person or as sculpture or art or whatever. It's not really up to me. I'm just gonna keep making whatever it is I'm making. But talking about the function of it, I've made a couple of half-functioning wooden cabinets. When you open the doors, there's something blocking the interior, which kind of reminds me of when you're going to get breakfast at a new restaurant with your partner and it's like, Let's go here, it says they're open and you get there and they're closed for some reason. Now what do I do? So you see this cabinet that has doors and in your mind you're like, what's inside? What can I put in it? I made one where you open the doors and there's this big chunk of pine with some inlays in it. But I also love making functional pieces. A big thing with the work I do is that the longevity is really attractive. You're learning traditional joinery, and all the right ways to make a piece last. It's nice knowing that once a piece has left the studio, to a client or a show, that thing's gonna outlive me. As long as I didn't break the rules too much. Usually it'll hold up for a long time.

Rio: Maybe I should challenge myself to do some non-functional objects. It's almost like I have a fear to do this. But maybe it's more fun. I think from the artist's side, it's doing the same thing. Like, Could this be a seat?

SU: Right, like if it has an obvious function, its "value" is more legible or obvious. I wanted to ask you about your process. It seems kind of intuitive for both of you, but how do you approach that, creating a piece? Where does it start?

Rio: In my case, I need to surprise myself. I need to get excited about a challenge.

Luke: For me, every piece is kind of different. Sometimes I'll sketch — I don't have a computer, I'm not a tech person, I don't do renderings or plans, I'll just sketch and have an idea or a visual in my head and just start doing it. Like Rio said, it's a surprise. I'm very much the same way. For example, I just made this rocking chair, and in my head, I wanted to do this stacked laminated backrest that came up from the back of the seat. But as I was making the rocker, I just started cutting some stuff to get going and then it ended up being way too back-heavy to do what I originally wanted to do. So I added these armrests that come out from the front in a low curve back to transition the weight in a nice rocking position. That's just kind of how that process went about. But I like to keep it pretty open. You kind of reveal these new details that you can use in future pieces or use a language that just arose in the piece you're making in another section of that piece.

Right now, I'm making this big fireplace piece and it's a little overwhelming. I'm like, What do I do here? I've been carving away. I have a hard time just leaving wood flat and smooth.

I don't have the patience to sit there and draw a piece like this in detail, I'd rather just get to it and trust. Even mistakes — sometimes I'll fuck something up and it's like, what do I do now? Well, I can fix it this way. That becomes part of it. The making will reveal new details that you didn't even see. The unknown of what this piece may look like or not look like is what's fun.

Rio: Do you take time and step back and look at the piece? Or are you like, do this, do that, quickly?

Luke: Both. Sometimes I get in a good kind of groove and I just don't think. If I look at it too much I'm gonna think about it too much and just gotta make a move. Even if I don't love what I did right away, I try to keep moving forward with it and trust that the rest will come together. I rarely like to backtrack or change things. In a way, it comes out more authentic. I do a little bit of both, letting a piece sleep sometimes or looking at it for a little while or I put the blinders on and work away and assess from there. But if I get stuck or I'm thinking about what to do next, it's time get out of here and let this thing sleep. That's happened on some pieces where I couldn't figure out the next move. This one chair sat for months, and then the answer came for a seat. So, it's kind of all over the place.







Rio: I had a similar story with this chair sitting there for months. Actually, I finished it, but I was too nervous. It was repairing someone's broken object, a project that I started, and I transformed it so radically, in a different direction, I was super worried about giving it back to this person. Like, Rio, where's my chair?

Luke: Was it a commission to take their old chair and do your thing on it?

Rio: Exactly. It came from a painter friend of mine, Peter McDonald, who also had a residency at Blunk Space. It was a Covid project. Covid hit, everything else stopped, no one knew what to do, and I felt super useless being a designer/woodworker. And my friend was like, Rio, I have this chair, you might have time now, you can do whatever with this, we just want to sit on it again. I just went crazy with it, lots of color, there's this hairy brush coming out of it, and I named it the Positive Chair, because it was during Covid. It was a fun, fun project, but I was super nervous. Maybe he wouldn't like it and be disappointed. But I enjoyed that risk-taking moment.

But also, my practice has different types of work. I do interior design, so I do lots of work on the computer and the most important thing is I design a very understandable plan for a company or someone who produces it. I also do product design with companies. It cannot be like that table that I just posted on Instagram. No one's gonna produce that ten thousand times, you know? It's not cost efficient. So I have to draw on the computer and then work with a team that's good at communication.

When I asked you if you step out and observe your work, and then do things, I was thinking about the time [at Blunk Space], I only had two weeks, and every time I cut a piece, I had three seconds to think what should I do with this piece? And then for another show this January I made different furniture pieces in one week.

Luke: Sometimes it's good to work like that, super quick. Because you don't think too much about it.

SU: How important is the handmade quality to you both, in your own furniture work? Luke, you don't have a computer, so you don't work with technology like that.

Rio: I think the most exciting projects for me are the one-off furniture pieces because you get to spend time with the piece. It's just the piece and me, and maybe an assistant. You just start working intuitively. It's such a good practice for your brain. You are there and you feel it, like, okay the dimension is maybe too big, maybe this part needs a little thing here, maybe something is missing. It's really good for my creative practices and getting new ideas out. I really enjoy doing this work with objects.

Luke: Same. I kind of don't even know how to do it any other way. I'm thinking about the next piece I want to make while making the piece I'm doing. I just don't have the brain for fine-tuning the design of a chair I want to put out. I guess there's a pro and a con to that, but for me it's the way I've been working and want to continue. One-off after one-off, or even custom commissions touching on an older piece or blending a piece here to an older piece and coming up with a table, blending the languages I've been working in over the years. One-of-a-kind pieces. Cause like Rio said, you're invested, you get kind of intimate with whatever you're working with. You go to bed thinking about what to do next on this thing. It occupies that part of your brain that's creative.

Rio: One of the reasons I really like this kind of work is that no one tells you what to do. I can work freely.

Luke: Having the freedom to create whatever is speaking to you at the moment is a huge blessing. I mean, who wants to be told what to do? And I've had those experiences where the client will reach out and push the design a little too much and it's like, you're not gonna tell the dentist how to drill your cavity. I try to voice that need for freedom in the whole process. At the end of the day, it's the best kind of relationship, right?

Rio: Are you planning to use different materials at some point? Are you interested?

Luke: Yeah. I work with copper as well but it's more decorative. I've been collecting old bricks and I have some pieces of bluestone laying around so I'm always kind of collecting materials. So we'll see. But for right now it's the wood and the copper.

Before we wrapped it up, Rio and Luke talked a bit about upcoming and previous shows, including Design Miami.



Luke: I was down in Miami for the first time to show with Objective Gallery.

Rio: Oh, I must have seen your work there because I did a show there too with Blunk Space.

Luke: That's right, you did the room dividers! Those are rad. I didn't realize that was you.

Rio: I like to change my style. Surprise!

Luke: It was all walnut right?

Rio: Redwood. From the area.

Luke: Nice. A lot of the wood for this fireplace, I was out in Pennsylvania with my girlfriend for her birthday and we stayed at this little cabin and the dude whose cabin it was is a woodworker. He had a shop on his land. He's in his 70s, still making work. And that Sunday he's like, Oh I'm going to pick up some wood from my local sawmill guy and I ended up getting a bunch of really beautiful cherry and walnut that were just fallen. I love finding material that way.

Rio: Do you know this guy Rafael Triboli, from Brazil?

Luke: Yeah, I just discovered his work recently!

Rio: You have a similarity in your work. I hung out with him in San Francisco in January.

Luke: His work's cool, leaving all the tool marks.

Rio: He also uses wood from the local area. He's a good person, a nice guy as well. I like people who are hardworking and nice. Honest.

Luke: Honest. Authentic. And no fluff.

Rio: No fluff. Well, a little bit, sometimes. A little bit of fluff is fine.

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