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# Hot Hand: Rio Kobayashi



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At 36, the designer Rio Kobayashi has a far-flung sensibility, a Millennial restlessness, and an aesthetic wisdom beyond his years. And perhaps most importantly in this day and age, Kobayashi's works are imbued with an infectious crossover appeal.



If there is a consistent throughline across Kobayashi's diverse projects, it is a strikingly graphic quality. This is again a generational affinity—his work always looks great on social media—with origins in his childhood in Japan. *Photo: Irene Yamaguchi*



For an artist of any era or background, “sympathetic invention” isn’t a sensibility that just springs up overnight. But, even in his early career, **Rio Kobayashi** has shown an ability to adapt to and intuit different disciplines and aesthetics well beyond his years. Lineage and geography take some of the credit: Kobayashi is originally from Mashiko, Japan, a town famous for its ceramics, and his father, **Shirobey**, is a well-known potter and master of wood firing. His Austrian-Italian mother, **Pia**, meanwhile, is a skilled conservator and master gilder. Though as Rio tells it, “There aren’t many baroque churches in Japan, so she grows vegetables and makes pickles for a living these days.”

With parents like that, it’s no surprise that he grew up making things, and it seems he never stopped. To this day, he remains blissfully innocent of conventional design training, though he did have a three-year apprenticeship at Einrichtungshaus Wetscher, the Austrian furniture company, where he picked up professional woodworking skills as well as a knowledge of European decorative art history.

This unusual background has given Kobayashi a hybrid sensibility, equal parts Kinkaku-ji and Wiener Werkstätte. What’s more surprising, and more impressive, is his adroit manipulation of such aesthetic vocabularies; he’s like a standup comedian with a bilingual repertoire. His breakthrough collection *Mikado*, first shown at the London Design Fair in 2017, is a case in point. The title refers not to the **Gilbert** and **Sullivan** operetta, but rather the popular game of pickup sticks, whose primary-colored stripes he emulated in the painted spindles of his furniture. Kobayashi was interested not just in the toy’s visual potential, but also its history; the game was apparently born in Japan and adapted in Europe, just like he was.



Rio Kobayashi, 'Mikado' (2017) *Photo: Courtesy of Rio Kobayashi Studio*

Kobayashi's star has been rising quickly, with his most recent blaze across the sky an exhibition at **Kate MacGarry's** well-regarded East London art gallery (more on that below). I myself first encountered him in 2024 at Design Miami. As curatorial director for the fair that year, I thought I knew where the action would be, but when I saw what he had made for Blunk Space, an up-and-coming gallery run by **Mariah Nielson**, I was floored. The booth was dominated by a beautifully articulated pair of redwood shelves, each of their hundred-odd asymmetrical elements lovingly shaped by hand. They were masterworks, and what's more, they perfectly conveyed the magic of where they'd been made: at the former home of Nielson's father, **J.B. Blunk**, a paragon of countercultural creativity. Somehow, this young guy from Japan by way of Austria, now based in London, had tuned in perfectly to the earthen energies of 1960s California.

# Commission Accomplished

You know a designer will go far when they pick up speed every time they bounce off something. Since that promising debut, Kobayashi has zigged and zagged so many times that he seems almost to be eluding pursuit: wall shelves shaped like robots, a coffee table shaped (and realistically painted) like a giant tuna, a zebra-striped dresser for Dolce & Gabbana—these are just a few of his unlikely, unforgettable creations. “I have to keep myself excited,” he told me. “It’s economically inefficient, but I seem to reset my practice every project.” In this respect, he is a typical born-digital Millennial; he moves easily from one frame of reference to the next, as if his brain were a web browser.

Generational attention span aside, it’s also true that Kobayashi is constantly reacting to new external stimuli. His business model, such as it is, has depended largely on private commissions, and his clients tend to give him a lot to react to. In one project, for the Berlin-based artist **Christine Sun Kim**, he transformed an apartment in a brutalist high-rise into an elegant Asian-fusion interior, with sliding partitions inspired by *shoji* screens. He is currently building a listening room/broadcast studio for the Future Days Shop in Amsterdam, founded by musician **Tomoyuki Katsurada**, lately of the Japanese rock band Kikagaku Moyo. The plan is to fill the narrow, tight space with a riot of color and pattern, combining painted passages with cherry and walnut marquetry to psychedelic effect.

Kobayashi has also made one public artwork, and it was a powerhouse. This was the *Off the Shelf Pavilion* (2024), built in London but inspired by Japanese and Austrian farmhouses, and filled with a collection of Portland stones, each tied with cord in the manner of *tomeishi* (literally “stop stones,” used to indicate walking



paths in Japanese gardens). Horizontal beams of Douglas fir were finished at the ends with alternating touches of gilding and blue paint, a nod to the Viennese Secession. Kobayashi designed the temporary pavilion with the engineering firm Webb Yates, and together they devised an ingenious system of clamped and wedged standardized—“off the shelf”—components so that the whole thing could be knocked down for later reuse.

If there is a consistent throughline across Kobayashi’s diverse projects, it is a strikingly graphic quality. This is again a generational affinity—his work always looks great on social media—with origins in his childhood in Japan. He grew up with anime and manga, and admires the subculture they inspire; it’s a youthful, obsessive energy he tries to channel in his own designs. His recent exhibition with Kate MacGarry—a gallery that normally shows fine art, not design—was built entirely from old bits of Victorian woodwork and salvaged furniture, including a few broken Thonet chairs. Kobayashi cut up all this source material, reconfigured it, then added color and text in both English and Japanese. I went to the opening of the show and it was packed, but it was the objects that were having the most brilliant conversation in the room, across culture, time, and space.

## Sushi Inversion Theory

For his next act, Kobayashi is participating in an ongoing project at Ginza Six, a Tokyo shopping center and gallery complex. The premise is beautifully simple: Over three years, six designers are each given an entire Yoshino cedar, whose remarkably clear wood was often used to build historic temples. Applying his usual waste-not-want-not methodology, Kobayashi has designed a seating collection in which his entire tree is used, including the rounded exteriors, which would normally be sliced off and chipped. Some of

the pieces are left natural, others stained in jewel-like blue, red, or green. Following the presentation of the seating this spring, he will take what remains of the timber—mainly the cores of the logs—and construct another pavilion in the gallery space.



Rio Kobayashi, 'A Tree' at Ginza Six (2026) *Photo: Daisuke Shima*

Kobayashi compares his Ginza Six concept to that of a California roll, which was developed in the late 1970s—it was the first type of sushi maki to have rice on the outside, making it more palatable to Americans than traditional seaweed-wrapped cylinders. This is not the most obvious comparison, perhaps, but it's characteristic of his associative thinking. The analogy also suggests that the project is another symbolic self-portrait, given his constant transformation and inversion of things Japanese. Even as he constantly reflects on his own cultural background, he's making work of universal appeal.

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If you happen to know a lot about Japanese and European design history, you'll be mightily impressed by his technically inventive bricolage. If not, that's fine too, for his works have the infectious crossover potential of a pop song. Kobayashi says he wants to make "everything for everyone." To a remarkable extent he has done that already, only a decade into his career—and he's just getting started.