



'Passage', 1993, bronze, stainless steel, concrete, 7.6 x 7.6 x 5.5 m



'Field/Scape 83-3', 1986, aluminium, stainless steel, 1.5 x 6.5 x 3 m

MUTANT COMMONALITIES

THE SCULPTURES OF MAMORU SATO

Mamoru Sato's primary interest lies in the challenge of taking ordinary or common materials and transforming them into site-specific public sculpture or small-scale kinetic gallery works. Profile by Rob Ditessa.

IN their book *Sculpture in the Sun* on the history of public sculpture in Hawaii, Georgia and Warren Radford explain how Hawaiians have always had a vibrant tradition of creating sculpture as a form of visual art culture. Moreover, from the 1950s, interest quickened in contemporary public sculpture and one contemporary artist they cite is Mamoru Sato, whose eight-metre terrazzo sculpture, *Dyad*, adorns Hawaii's gateway to the world, Honolulu International Airport. In a concise critical evaluation of his work, Professor Gaye Chan, who chairs the Department of Art and Art

History at the University of Hawaii at Manoa where Sato teaches sculpture, adds that Sato is equally known for his public commissions as for his small-scale gallery works. She tells *Craft Arts* that Sato is unique amongst artists of his generation for creating sculptures of striking modernist forms that are also kinetic and interactive. While public art is often grand static monuments, some of Sato's public sculptures are designed to respond to natural forces like the wind, thereby sustaining a constant engagement with the environment. Also of note is his groundbreaking explo-



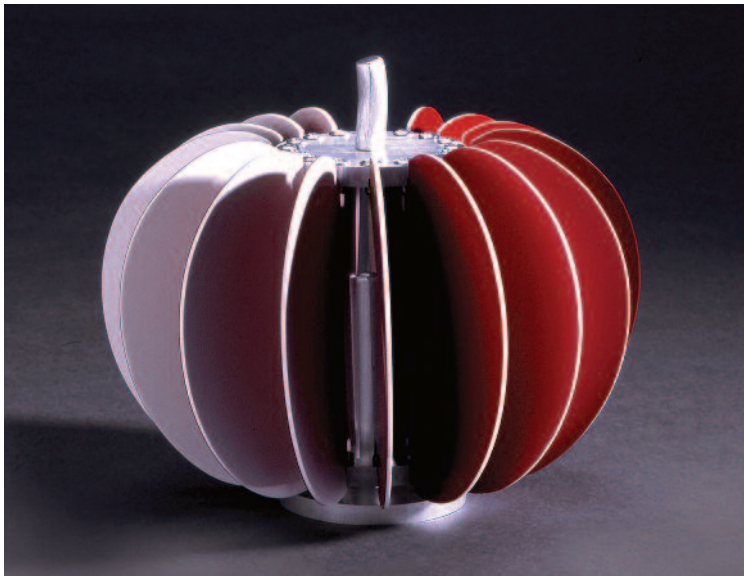
'Whorl', 2008, aluminium, stainless steel, 29 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm



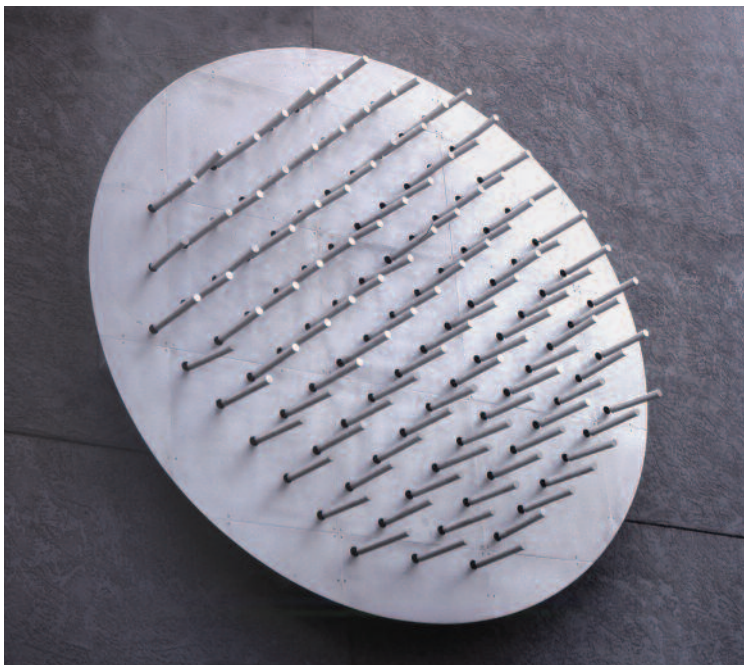
'Denizen', 2008, aluminium, stainless steel, brass, 25.4 x 15 x 15 cm



'Circle Weave 1', 2005, PVC and aluminium, diam. 183 cm



'Apple', 2005, plastic, aluminium and stainless steel, 14 x 15 x 15 cm



ration of using industrial products as art material. PVC pipes are a recurring favourite that Sato has returned to throughout his career. By using them in unintended ways, he achieves a perfect balance of formal beauty and humour. Andrew Rose, the director of the eponymously named gallery that represents Sato in Hawaii, says that he values the way Sato's refined yet playful sensibilities rise to the surface in his works whether he imbues them with kinetic energy, re-envision materials in new ways or alludes poetically to icons and ideas. 'His facture is always of the highest quality and demonstrates his exceptional intelligence in crafting original solutions to complex aesthetic and technical problems. A master of his craft as well as of the ideas of his art, Hawaii is fortunate to have him practicing here. Beyond what is already evident in his works, which are representative of the surfaces, forms, materials and subjects found in modern Hawaii, they especially can be placed in an art historical framework that is Contemporary Pacific; a synthesis of cultures from throughout our ocean, including mainland US, Polynesia and Asia; cultures to which Sato has lifelong personal and professional connections.'

Mamoru Sato was born in El Paso (Texas) in 1937. After he and his family spent a year in an internment camp in Arizona at the beginning of WWII, they set up home on a farm in southeastern Colorado. This was not the beautiful part of the famed state, with the Rocky Mountains, but the plains where extreme weather dominated, bringing blizzards and thunder, hail and dust storms. The experience of these elemental forces would later inform Sato's creativity and artwork. As well, he would exercise the mechanical skills and aptitude he developed in farm life, from learning to work with his hands in maintaining and mending machinery, and building structures such as sheds. Constructing model airplanes and naval ships occupied his spare time as he was growing up. At school, he enjoyed art projects even though scarce resources limited them to two-dimensional work only.

Academic success saw Sato study aeronautical engineering at the University of Colorado, but he lost interest in the subject and dropped out of school for two years, working in a variety of jobs such as the post office and landscaping. When Sato returned to formal studies, he chose a basic sculpture course because he wanted to once again work with his hands and experience objects with which he could physically interact. His style and technique caught the eye of Professor John Wilson who persuaded Sato to continue in the field. With his encouragement and assistance in gaining a scholarship, Sato completed a Fine Arts degree, then a Master of Fine Arts in Sculpture. 'He is the reason why I am doing what I am doing today,' Sato tells *Craft Arts* from his office at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu where he holds the position of Professor of Art. He came to Hawaii in 1965 to teach for a few years, and stayed.

About working in Hawaii, a place that many people may consider a secluded paradise, Sato offers, 'We have the advantage of living in the middle of the Pacific where many artists stop on their way to the Orient or when going to mainland US. They often visit here to give presentations at the university. We also have an active "Intersections" program where artists of interest are invited to give lectures and workshops. Students in my classes make certain that I'm on top of the "art scene". This combination ensures that I remain actively engaged.'

As a teacher, he finds satisfaction in fostering talent and encouraging students, as he was encouraged, to create their own art. He stresses that exotic materials are not necessary to create sculptural art that engages the viewer and draws in the audience so that they become participants. He goes on to say he is not a patient person and likes to look

'Ocean/Scape 83-3', 1986, aluminium, stainless steel, diam. 3 m

at and physically experience the material before working with it. The next sculpture often begins from an encounter with a newly discovered material or revisiting something that he has used previously. 'My primary interest lies in the challenge of taking ordinary or common materials and transforming them into works of art. I enjoy experimenting with various materials that can be found at the local hardware store or are encountered during one's everyday living, and coming up with a sculpture which, when a viewer interacts with it, the material from which it is made isn't immediately apparent. I also enjoy taking ordinary materials and through design, manipulation or engineering, have them act or move in a way that emulates nature, such as the gentle bending of stalks of wheat in a breeze.'

His sculptures have changed over time to coincide with the different materials and techniques with which he has experimented, from bronze casting and woodcarving to resins. He has worked with vinyl sheeting and then with terrazzo for larger commissioned works. Taking on larger projects often involved collaborating with contractors, which sometimes distressed Sato because he was unable to control every aspect of the creative process to his satisfaction. At this point, he began to experiment with kinetic sculpture with its challenge of taking hard materials and finding ways of having them move in a desired manner, activated by hand, wind or motor. Currently, he is working with PVC plumbing parts which allow him the latitude to emulate a wide range of movements in his kinetic pieces. Devising a system or design that allows the components to move in a desired manner presents a technical challenge that stimulates Sato. Up to this time, he has succeeded in incorporating gentle movements rather than fast, frenetic, or harsh. He has also created pieces using PVC pipe where a viewer is able to transform a sculpture into their own desired shape. 'Finding new and unexpected ways to use a given material is exciting,' says Sato.

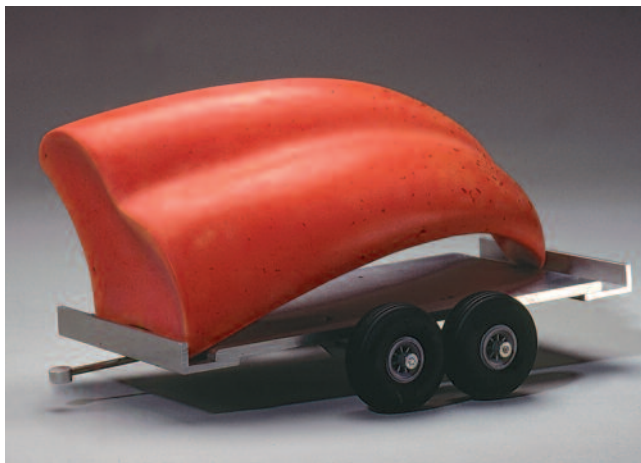


'Circle Link', 2007, PVC, aluminium, 51 x 51 x 10 cm

piece. It is located at the entrance to a parking structure so that those entering or leaving the building can walk through the arch and interact with the full sized bronze figures.'

In summing up, Mamoru Sato hopes that the viewers of his work can relate to it on some level. He neither expects nor wants anyone to understand it completely. 'It's a much fuller experience when the viewer brings his own experience and is able to begin the relationship.'

Rob Ditessa



'Tongue', 1996, polyester resin, aluminium, stainless steel, rubber and plastic, 12.7 x 26 x 14 cm

The artist's inspiration often comes from the actuality of the material, sometimes from an intriguing movement or a small detail of an item that has sparked his imagination. Sato readily admits he rarely draws or sketches out an idea. For the smaller works, he begins by doing mental revisions in his mind until he is satisfied. The only time, he says, that he resorts to drawing is when he has to convey his concept to someone, to determine quantities of material he will need to complete a piece, or if a contractor is involved. For the larger site-specific projects, the process always begins with making a scale-model. He always takes into account the audience as well as the sculpture's interaction with the immediate surrounding. 'For me, *Passage*, with the large arch and the family of four figures, is a kinetic

'Forest/Scope 83-3', 1986, aluminium, stainless steel, 430 x 270 x 90 cm

