Mira Nakashima

Architect, Craftsperson, and Creative Director, George Nakashima Woodworker, S.A.

Conducted by Masako Shinn on November 25, 2011 at Nakashima Conoid Studio, New Hope, Pennsylvania

Mira Nakashima was born on February 11, 1942 in Seattle, Washington, and grew up mostly in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. She studied architecture at Harvard College, and later received a master's degree in architecture from Waseda University in Tokyo. She joined her father's studio, George Nakashima Woodworker, S.A., in 1976, and later became a vice president, designer, and shop supervisor. After his death in 1990, she took over as Creative Director, where she continues her leading role. Her furniture has exhibited throughout the United States.

In this interview, Nakashima speaks of her life and career, encompassing her childhood, family, and education; her experiences as a Japanese American woman; and her goals for producing her own designs as well as continuing her father's practice. Projects discussed include The Nakashima Reading Room at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania (1993); the Concordia chair and the "Keisho" collection furniture series, introduced in 1998; and the book Nature, Form and Spirit: The Life and Legacy of George Nakashima (2003).

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.
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Masako Shinn (MS): This is Masako Shinn with Mira Nakashima, November 25th, at her studio in New Hope. We just had a tour of the ground of Nakashima compound and we are now sitting down for an interview. Thank you so much once again for doing the interview.

Mira Nakashima (MN): No, thank you. Nice to meet you.

MS: I know you've done many interviews before so some questions might be a little redundant.

MN: That's okay, I always come up with some new answer.

MS: Maybe we can start with your childhood. What do you remember from your early childhood?

MN: Well I was born in Seattle Washington in 1942. When I was six weeks old, we were put into the camps, actually the relocation centers, and then to the incarceration camps in Minidoka. We were there for a little over a year and my dad's professor at MIT contacted Mr. Raymond and asked him to sponsor my father to come to the east coast. So Mr. Raymond was our sponsor. Mr. Raymond had been my father's employer in Tokyo from 1934 to 1936. He said he would sponsor us to get out of the camp, and that's why were in Bucks County. I don't remember a whole lot about being in the camp. I was just a little tyke—

MS: So you don't remember anything from that time—

MN: I don't remember—my mother [Marion Nakashima, née Marion Sumire Okajima] says I had a packing box as a playpen. I sort of remember standing on the top of my doll so I could see out over the top of this box but I don't know if that' s a real memory—I'm not sure.

MS: Did your parents talk about their experience at the camps much?

MN: No, my parents would not talk, and my grandparents would not talk. Nobody wanted to go into that, they just wanted to forget it ever happened.

MS: Really?

MN: Hmm. And my uncle was in the 442nd and he refused to talk about it. I know there's been a lot of interviews of people who were in the 442nd and they've opened up and talked about their experience which is a good thing. But the nisei generation just kept it all inside, until my generation, the sansei, decided it wasn't right and somebody should do something about it and started digging out all this information and got reparations. Now they just finished awarding a lot of the men who are still alive from the 442nd.

MS: I thought your father met the Japanese carpenter at the camp.

MN: He did.

MS: I read it was a turning point for him so that's why I though maybe he talked about it.

MN: He did talk about that and the fact that he was able to learn so much from this carpenter and he worked along side him. He was the designer and the carpenter was his helper but the carpenter taught him a lot about Japanese carpentry for which he was eternally grateful. He wanted to thank him and he was never able to remember the man's name or locate where he went. My cousin John Terry who's been doing a Nakashima documentary research and went through the records from Minidoka found someone he thought maybe the man. I think he was gone by the time my cousin found out about it but he found where his children were. The name was Gentaro Hikogawa, and he found the children and the children, one of them anyway, said, "oh I remember him, father working with Nakashima." So the relatives still exist but it's too bad they didn't meet when they were still alive.

MS: So you moved here after the camp?

MN: No we were at the Raymond farm and I think I showed you the Milk House table—that was made in the milk house at the Raymond farm. Mr. Raymond said he could use that as workshop while he was working on the project. Otherwise he was not allowed to work on government projects because that's what Mr. Raymond was doing at the time and they were doing things that dad wasn't allowed to touch. So he was doing chicken farming and he made furniture in his spare time, when he wasn't chasing chickens.

MS: How long were you there at the Raymond farm?

MN: We were there a little over a year.

MS: But you don't remember much?

MN: I kind of remember bits and pieces. I remember Mrs. Raymond and her very shrill voice. Mr. Raymond was kind of stern. I remember living upstairs on the third floor of the Raymond farmhouse and I remember distinctly one day my mother was out downstairs and I was sitting on the steps and there was a window by the steps and I pushed the screen out of the window and I was calling my mother. She was so afraid I was going to fall out that window. She told me to stay still and don't move and I thought, what's the matter with her? I remember that.

MS: So do you remember moving to this house or to this ground?

MN: Oh yeah I do remember that and I remember the old house where we lived on Aquetong too. It was the original cottage. After dad got tired or raising chickens, that's' where he first started his business.

MS: His first studio?

MN: Yeah but he just worked out of the garage. I remember the old house and the potbelly stove. Millie Johnston she met me and used to take me up to Bethlehem and I remember that.

MS: What was it like growing up? You were the only child, right? Your brother was much younger so did you spend a lot of time yourself?

MN: Oh yeah, my mother never drove, so I spent most of my time by myself.

MS: You didn't have too many same age children friends?

MN: No, there was little girl who lived around the corner and we became friends, I don't remember how we met, but we used to spend time visiting back and forth. When I was at Raymond farm there was a family named Charry. Nick and Marcia Charry—they were about my age, so I used to go play with them and they were within walking distance, they were my friends at the Raymond farm and I haven't seen them much lately, but I still consider them friends.

MS: Did you do a lot of drawing? I saw the picture of you drawing on the big screen.

MN: Yes.

MS: I guess that's in this house.

MN: There's one, this screen here which I did when I was in high school and the one down at the old Kevin house. It's got stuff in front of it right now but that was when I was young and I did sort of realistic horses and cows and pigs and chickens and things like that.

MS: Were there lots of art books and architecture things around the house when you were growing up?

MN: I don't remember that we had that many books. I read a lot but I was reading the kind of stuff that little girls like to read like horse stories and *Wizard of Oz* series and I don't remember reading any design books particularly.

MS: I think in one of your interviews, you said that in the Nakashima household business and family was completely integrated. So I thought maybe you had a lot of exposure to artists or what your father was doing.

MN: Oh yeah, dad had a lot of artist friends, but when I was growing up, I just mostly played with the children of the artist. Ben Shahn was a really good friend of dad's and he had children who were a little bit older than me but we would visit together. Bill Smith was another artist, he's the one who painted my dad's portrait in the Michener Museum, and he had children who were my friends too so I mostly visited with the kids and the adults would do their adult talk about art and philosophy.

MS: Were your parents strict?

MN: Oh yeah.

MS: So they wanted you to be the good obedient Japanese daughter?

MN: Yes. They tried—

MS: They give you lots of chores to do at the house and asked for proper manner—

MN: Yeah, well mostly I was supposed to do what I was told and not question authority and when I came back in the seventies I had decided I needed to take an assertive training course and dad didn't like that at all. I wasn't supposed to assert myself.

MS: What was your mother like? She's Japanese American also?

MN: She's Japanese American but she's one-quarter Holland Dutch. Her oldest sister was born in Tokyo so she had property there, but they grew up in Hollywood. When I was back in California and L.A. just recently, there were things—I think would have been near where she used to be when she grew up. Her two older sisters kind of took care of her, after her mother died, and her mother died when she was thirteen, so her older sisters brought her up in Hollywood.

MS: Was she very Japanese in terms of moral and educational philosophy? Very conservative?

MN: Conservative? I guess so.

MS: What about your father?

MN: Yeah, my mother was probably more the taskmaster than my dad. My dad was very supportive. Let's see how will I say this? He was more forgiving. I mean he was very strict. I remember once when I was visiting my friends down by Raymond Farm I didn't want to go home because that was a fun household. Their mother and their father were both artists and we would have cookie decorating parties at Christmas and she'd have all these different colored icings and decorations and we kids would sit around the table and make all these messy cookies. Nicky who was about my age, was always licking his fingers in between cookies and it was really fun. She used to have Halloween and Valentine—anyway—one day I was visiting down there and I said I don't want to go home and dad spanked me really hard.

MS: Oh my.

MN: So I never tried to question his authority.

MS: How old were you?

MN: Oh maybe five or six? So he was a taskmaster but he was always very sweet.

MS: Did you go to local school?

MN: Yeah I went to New Hope elementary school and I did pretty well in school. There were two boys in my class, who were at the top of the class and we were like competitors—who's going to win the spelling bee, who's going to win the math bee, we were very competitive. Two of those classmates actually went to Harvard at the same time I did.

MS: So you went to elementary school and middle school and high school locally.

MN: High school I went to Solebury School, the lady who came earlier was involved with Solebury School and my brother and I both went to Solebury School.

MS: Is that far away?

MN: No, it's on the other side of town.

MS: What did you like at school?

MN: What did I like at school most? Dad didn't think much of my art teacher. She wasn't very inspiring. I really loved music and I really loved languages and so when I was going to college I was trying to find a college that had a good curriculum in language and music and I chose Harvard. Lots of choices at Harvard, but dad said—he said he really expected I would go into architecture so I went—

MS: He expected you to go into architecture. So that was discussed before you went to college? Did you know that was his expectation?

MN: Not really, until it came time to choose my major and I wasn't given too much choice.

MS: Did you rebel?

MN: No, it was okay. I mean I always liked math and science and art anyway, so it was a good combination.

MS: Did you keep up with music in college?

MN: I was in the choral society for four years and I sang in a couple of musicals. I tried out for the Bach Society. I had played clarinet when I was in junior high school and then I started flute when I was in high school. I hadn't played clarinet for a long time so my tryouts were really awful. There were so many other flutists who were better than me, I didn't make the orchestra, but I liked playing in chamber groups and things like that.

MS: Were there other Asian American children in middle school and elementary school around here when you were growing up?

MN: There was one family whose children were in my class I think in middle school but that was it. The kids always kind of, at least in elementary school I remember, teased me a lot for looking different.

MS: Oh I'm sure.

MN: But in college it was kind of reverse discrimination. Everybody thought that I was Asian and therefore I should date all these Asian students who were at Harvard at the time. I thought, I don't have anything in common with them, you know. I didn't speak any Japanese and that wasn't much help.

MS: Were there other female students at Harvard in architecture program? Was that a big program?

MN: No it wasn't that big and there were women in my architectural sciences class. It was mostly design and architectural history.

MS: So that was all combined.

MN: Uhm hum. There were only twenty-five percent women at Harvard when I was there so there were probably at least three, or four or five women in my class.

MS: Did you remain very competitive at Harvard?

MN: Yes—I wasn't that good in design. I was in the dance group and I was president of both the dance group and the choral society in my senior year so I didn't have enough time to spend on my architecture, so I didn't do as well as I should have.

MS: I'm sure you did great.

MN: No, I didn't. [laughs.]

MS: What was it like to finally leave home and just go out into the world on your own and going to college? Because it seems like you had a pretty strict parents and a tight knit family. And it's a long way away on your own—

MN: I don't even remember being home sick. I was in a girl's dorm. I had some friends who were girls in junior high school and in high school but mostly of my good friends were boys. I lived in the dormitory for three years and it was fun having girl friends.

MS: That's great, so after that you went to Japan, right?

MN: Dad had known Junzo Yoshimura and Kunio Maekawa from the Raymond office when he was there and also John Minami who was in engineering. Yoshimura was teaching at Geidai so I interviewed at Geidai and he said well I could be a special student if I couldn't read and write my papers in Japanese, but I would just be a special student and not a degree student. I went to Waseda and John Minami said you can come to Waseda, which is a private university, and you can write your papers and exams in English and you can get a real degree, so that sounded like a good idea, and that's why I went to Waseda.

MS: In the beginning you went to Japan with your friend Millie Johnstone.

MN: Yes.

MS: Can you tell me a little bit about her? It sounds like she was a very interesting lady and you had a very unusual relationship.

MN: Yeah she was like my fairy godmother. She was so good to me. I remember when I was about two and down in New Hope, there was a hunchback lady who had a bookstore in town. I just happened to be in the bookstore and Millie was coming through. She was studying art and she visited her little bookshop at the same time and she asked me if I would like a book and I said no thank you, I already have one. And then she said well, would you like to come home with me, I said, okay. So my parents sent me home with her.

MS: Really?

MN: We didn't know who she was or anything but I guess they just decided she must be a good person. They sent me off and she lived in Bethlehem. She had lost a child when he was two, and I think she was kind of looking for a replacement for her lost child. So I became that lost child and I don't remember how many times a year but she would come down and pick me up and take me up to Bethlehem. Her husband was vice president of Bethlehem Steel so they were very wealthy. She was into needlepointing. She really didn't quite fit in with the corporate world, she was really from an artistic background. I think she was from a wealthy Quaker family in Philadelphia but she had been a dancer. She danced in Martha Graham in the thirties and as she got older she couldn't dance any more so she wanted to study tea ceremony. Alan Watts was organizing a tour to go to Japan the year I graduated from college, so she wanted to go on that and she invited me to come with her. So we went on this Zen Buddhist tour of Japan.

MS: How long were you touring?

MN: Maybe a month or so, and then after the tour was over, I stayed with my aunt [Thelma Shizuko, née Okajima Brown]. I went to Tokyo and then she went to Urasenke in Kyoto and studied tea ceremony for a month more and then she went back to New York, where she founded the Urasenke Tea Center.

MS: Oh she's the founder. I had no idea.

MN: Yes.

MS: So you didn't speak Japanese when you went to Japan?

MN: No, I studied for two years when I went to Harvard but I studied non-intensively. Only about three times a week instead of six times a week, that’s all I could handle at the time. I couldn’t speak a word when I got there, and people thought I should understand and I didn’t understand a thing. So I studied intensive Japanese until the semester in April. I studied Japanese as a second language kind of course all the time I was at Harvard, but it hadn’t been for my student buddies, I wouldn’t have made it through the [Waseda] program at all.

MS: I totally understand.

MN: It was so hard.

MS: Oh it must have been very difficult.

MN: Because I knew how to read and write but I was used to these neat little square characters and the teachers would write on the board—what was that? I could understand slow Japanese, but when they speak normal speaking language and the technical language, I didn’t know where I was. Luckily my classmates all wanted to learn English so they stayed after class.

MS: Where did you stay?

MN: I stayed with Aunt Thelma for a while and then I stayed for some reason in an apartment by myself for a while. Then my dad’s relatives decided it wasn’t right for me living alone in this apartment so they took me into their house. I can't remember the name of the stop, I had to go through Shinjuku. I used to know how to do that. I don't remember the name of the stop.

MS: But you felt pretty comfortable there.

MN: Oh yeah. I went to Japan and I got off the plane and looked around and thought, oh gee, everybody is the same as me. It was different, because I was always different from everybody.

MS: Was it difficult to be in Japan because of the language and unfamiliar culture? What was it like?

MN: Well I stayed with my aunt for the first maybe half a year so it was fine. Auntie Thelma, she didn’t speak much Japanese, she spoke English. So I stayed in her apartment and that was okay and then I lived by myself for a little while and that was okay, I didn’t feel uncomfortable even though I couldn’t speak the language that well.

MS: People are friendly and helpful.

MN: After I married one of my classmates and when we lived in apartment—the second apartment, the first apartment was too expensive so we gave it up and lived in an apartment without a bath, I used to go the Japanese bath. One day I came back from the bath and I said, oh, some of the old ladies washed my back for me, and he says, oh they must think you're really Japanese.

MS: You had a Japanese wedding?

MN: Not a Japanese style—it was a western wedding.

MS: Did your parents fly in?

MN: My father did, my mother was upset, and she didn't want to come.

MS: Why was she upset?

MN: Because I was marrying a Japanese.

MS: Why was that?

MN: She was mad at me.

MS: I am sure all was okay after you child arrived.

MN: She was not happy with children, my mother. I don't think she really wanted me and then when I turned out to be a girl instead of a boy, she really didn't want me. When my brother came along, she was forty-two, and she hadn't been planning on having any more children and she wasn't happy about that either. My aunt from Tokyo came and took care of my brother when he was a baby.

MS: Was she more interested in business?

MN: I guess so—and she ran the business for years, and with an iron fist.

MS: She had a central role in running your father's business then. How interesting. So you had a baby when you were still a student right?

MN: Yes.

MS: It must have been so hard.

MN: He was a good baby. He was born in November so only had from November to March or something when I had to carry him around to class. I used to have a carrier.

MS: So you took the baby to class?

MN: Yeah.

MS: That's very unusual.

MN: Yes, it was.

MS: Then you came back to the U.S. when the baby was still young?

MN: Oh yes, he was six months when I came back.

MS: Was it because of your husband's job?

MN: Well he wasn't making enough money to support us and so my parents kind of tricked me. They said they wanted to see the baby, so I said okay I'll bring the baby home. Then they didn't want to let me go back because it was hard, and so they invited my husband [Tetsu Amagasu]—my ex-husband now—to come to the United States. Dad had a friend from Fontainebleau, when he went there, whose brother had an architectural office in Pittsburgh and that's why we were in Pittsburgh almost four years.

MS: You had several children after that, relatively close together. You must have been very busy.

MN: I was too busy. I did a little bit of freelance work but not very much—

MS: That was not the focus of your life.

MN: Yeah and when I was in college I did freelance work, I did some translation, I think it was Kodansha or Tuttle I forgot.

MS: Did you miss working while you were raising the children?

MN: No, I was too busy.

MS: Did you enjoy architecture though when you were studying and practicing?

MN: Ah—yeah I did when I was studying. I never really practiced. It was atelier system so we did work, we worked on the Imperial Palace music hall, with Kenji Imai, so that was fun.

MS: It must have been wonderful. After Chicago you came back to Pennsylvania?

MN: You mean after Pittsburgh?

MS: Pittsburgh, yes. 1969 right?

MN: 1969.

MS: And then you started to work with your father.

MN: And actually stayed down here, because my house wasn't ready yet when we first came and there was a bed back there and the kids—I don't know where they all slept—they used to run so around. There were three of them at the time, and they got into three compartments in this chest and move the doors back and forth and played down here.

MS: What did you do first?

MN: I just helped mother. I could only work part-time when the kids were young.

MS: So it's the business side, the bookkeeping, and client contact?

MN: Yeah but dad also started me on doing the working drawings. Before the work went into the workshop they had to do a set of drawings so I started doing that as well.

MS: So was there a specific apprentice system or system of learning that your father used for the new people? Did you go through that?

MN: Yeah, he had his own system. It was sort of case-by-case. I don't think it was an organized system. Usually people would come in and they would work on the grounds. If they got good at that then they would work in the finishing room because they couldn't hurt themselves in there, and if they were good enough they would go to the chair department. He used to have a really, really good man from who was trained in Germany who worked in the chair department and he was actually the trainer for the people in the chair department and my husband John [Yarnall] worked with him for a number of years. Then if there were an opening in the main shop, he would go to the main shop, and apprentice to one of the men.

MS: Is that what you did?

MN: I never really went through the full apprenticeship. I was in drawing down here and I was in the office with mom and I guess I worked on the ground a little bit.

MS: So mostly designing and on the business side.

MN: Yeah and then I was in charge of making small things. I would use up the scraps in the workshop and make little tables and pencil holders and candleholders and letter openers. I made one end table I guess and I never got to make cabinets.

MS: Did you enjoy furniture making from the beginning? Was it more enjoyable, more suited to your temperature than architecture?

MN: Well it was more manageable at the time. The trouble with going to Waseda was that they assume that you knew how to draw already because of their undergraduate program. They started from scratch and all the drawings are done by hand so you had years and years of drafting by the time you got to graduate school. I had freehand drawing from Harvard. I didn't have any drafting until I got to graduate school. They were all the free hand drawing and just designing spaces and conceptual things and it was three-dimensional making stuff like sculpture. So by the time I got to Wasada, I didn't know how to draft at all. That's why I got involved with my husband because he was a whiz draftsman. He knew how to teach. I don't know if he taught me so much but he showed me how to draft.

MS: I see. Did you consider doing something else at some point while you were working at the studio? Did you think about doing something else other than woodworking?

MN: Yeah. I took my assertive training course and dad fired me. [laughs.]

MS: You actually got fired?

MN: Oh yeah, over and over again. I stood up to dad when he wasn't used to being stood up to. He was very, very much—I wouldn't call him a dictator, but he didn't allow for any kind of feedback from employees, and he didn't want any kind of feedback from me. But it was okay because he sort of gave me a job that he didn't want to do or couldn't do which was designing a home for Steven Rockefeller. Dad had done Nelson Rockefeller's home in Pocantico Hills, but one of his sons Steven was an instructor of Middlebury College and he wanted my dad to design him a house. Dad said he didn't have time to do that, so my ex-husband and I worked on this house in Vermont. It was very interesting because he wanted it to be a passive solar house in Vermont and he did not want to face the house south because the view was to the west or something.

MS: Pretty challenging.

MN: It was a challenge.

MS: And then you came back?

MN: He decided he'd take me back.

MS: You took over the studio management in 1990 after your father passed away right?

MN: Right.

MS: Was it a natural progression for you? Were you prepared?

MN: There wasn't any real preparation for it. I mean in my little mind I thought well, I know how to saw the wood, I know how to pick out wood for clients. I know how to design the furniture and do the drawings and I thought that was all I needed, but it wasn't all I needed. Mother let me do that but she was still calling the shots, and there was a lot more to it than just making furniture. It was the PR aspect of it I had no inkling that that's what the business ran on. Dad had generated all this publicity for so many years that it kind of all fell apart after he died. The press is so fickle—it worked in dad's favor while dad was alive. I mean they had myth built up for the press that dad was making everything with his own two hands, everything that went out of the shop was made only by dad. He didn't acknowledge any of the other people that worked with him. So when he died, everybody assumed that it was over, that nobody else could do it. Some of our clients kept their orders, but most of them I could say probably 60% of them cancelled. A lot of them assumed that if dad was not there any longer of course it wouldn't be the same quality and the price should be less. I said, well it costs us the same amount of labor, same amount of wood, same amount of time as when dad was alive so we can reduce the prices a little bit but we can't reduce them too much because we just can't make ends meet that way. So we retained maybe 40 to 50% of our orders. But the rest of them, all fell by the wayside and after three years we didn't have any work to do. It was pretty—it was very discouraging. I was busy trying to fill those orders that we did have, one of the biggest one was the Krosnick job in Princeton. Their house was burnt down in 1989 and dad said he would rebuild all the furniture for it. My ex-husband's office actually rebuilt the house itself, and then we were going to rebuild all the furniture but that took about three years. I was busy trying to figure that one out. She was a very difficult client; she was my trainer for the future. She wanted to see all kinds of things and design all the furniture that would exactly fit her house, things that would look pretty much like what she had lost, so that took us about three years. Then we started running out of work and thank goodness the Michener Museum decided to do a memorial room for my dad about the same time.

MS: So that's what brought back the business.

MN: Yes—it brought us back to life.

MS: Did you have to let people go and change the business structure during difficult time?

MN: Yeah a lot of people left. Well our head man left because he saw the writing on the wall. He thought that it wasn't going to go without dad so he left and several of the other men left, and we had to cut back to a four days week and we had to cut back our salaries.

MS: So how long did this sort of tough period last?

MN: Oh, about two years. I felt we would probably go into the red building the pole barn where all that lumber is in storage. I thought well maybe we should just sell the wood, and I thought again and I felt well that was dad's legacy, he actually selected those logs and milled that lumber and had a specific purpose in mind, so that's his legacy, and I guess we better try to use up the lumber pile. So we built that shed and I thought we'd go in the red, because it was an expensive structure. But we did it and we kept all the lumber.

MS: So really the Michener Museum's reading room turned things around.

MN: Yeah the PR person. I always felt a little embarrassed because they gave me so much PR that it looked like there wasn't anything going on in the rest of the building but there was a whole lot going on.

MS: Did you do a lot of lectures associated with the Michener Museum?

MN: They had a couple of shows that included Nakashima. You know one thing they have done-I guess it was from that time they had us do tours of the studio just like the one you were on.

MS: Right, right.

MN: And they started off with one tour and then they had so many people wanting them that they added two more tours so there are three tours a year since maybe 1994.

MS: Oh, I see. So that's how you got exposure to wider audience.

MN: Yeah, so that's good exposure.

MS: So when you the business turned around, was it all new customers or did the old customers come back?

MN: Well, I think just getting the word out that we were still alive and still making furniture brought some people back. We get a fair amount of second generation or third generation clients and then we get, you know, divorces. [laughs.]

MS: Divorces? [laughs.]

MN: And, deaths and so forth. So we got some business that way but I think we got a lot of new clients. Also, Bob Aibel from the Moderne Gallery has been a champ—he's been so supportive. He was selling the vintage Nakashima since 1984 when dad was still alive and he said back then they were just used furniture.

MS: Hmm.

MN: But he started out so he knew a lot about the characteristics of the older furniture, and he decided he needed to do a show. He'd done several shows on Nakashima before, but he did this show in I think it was '93 or '94 that put us back on the map. He hired a PR person and the PR person said well, you've got to name your new collection that you've created since George is gone and you've got to have all these pictures and you know—interviews and so forth. I had been doing ads in different magazines like, *Modernism*, *Interior Design* and *Architectural Digest*, and *Architectural Digest* actually did a free article on us and that was the turning point.

MS: When was that?

MN: I think that was '94 or something.

MS: So that brings me to the Keisho Collection. You named the new collection Keisho Collection right? And I wanted to talk to you a little bit about how you keep the balance between developing your own creativity and then keeping your father's legacy and tradition.

MN: Hmmm.

MS: You talked about the wood in the storage, and that's his legacy. You used the wood for your new collection so that's one way to combine legacy and your creativity—what is your feeling about that?

MN: Well the majority of work that comes in is based on my father's designs. Some of it is, like that chair that was picked up just now. It was higher than normal and I mean the normal chairs were thirteen inches high like the one you're sitting on. We made them an inch taller for the—not MoMA but was it, the one that has a Japanese wing? In New York—

MS: Metropolitan Museum?

MN: Metropolitan—yeah—dad did a room for them in the mid-eighties and the person in that gallery said that most Americans have long legs, we have to make the chair a little bit higher.

MS: How about Japan Society? They have lots of beautiful Nakashima.

MN: They have lots of good pieces and I re-did the President's office a few years back.

MS: So that was you?

MN: Yeah, but nobody sees it.

MS: I've been in there many times.

MN: Oh, okay. That was me. But most of it's based on Dad's designs, which is interpreted and reinterpreted, resized, for the different spaces.

MS: I see.

MN: So most of what comes through is based on dad's designs but every now and then—well, Mrs. Krosnick in Princeton was the first one who said, "I want you to make something different from what George made." So I sort of experimented and made a few new designs for her and then people will come in and they'll basically order something that we haven't done before and then we'll create something different.

MS: Right.

MN: Or it's a funny shaped piece of wood that won't fit dad's designs and we have to do something different. Or that little chair over there, the Concordia chair? I designed for my friends who are chamber music players.

MS: Ah.

MN: Well, I had loaned them Nakashima chairs and they said they're not—they don't work for us when we're playing music because you have to sit back in a Nakashima chair and they liked to sit up straight, and they wanted a flat seat so they could move around because they're very, very active players.

MS: Oh, I see.

MN: So I designed that for them—mostly for chamber music players.

MS: Yes—that's great! What an interesting story. Do you play something yourself still?

MN: I do. I play guitar and flute, still—

MS: Oh, I see. Do you sit in that chair?

MN: Actually, I don't. But I play with a group and we sit on stools, because we have to be tall, you know, high. And I have a music stand that dad made for me, but I don't carry it around. It's too heavy! I use a metal music stand.

MS: You do a lot of designing now right? And you also run the business, and you write, and you do exhibition consultancy and curation too. What do you enjoy the most of all that you are doing now?

MN: What do I enjoy the most?

MS: What do you like doing the most—they're all connected, I guess?

MN: Mmm-mmm. I like creating shows and setting them up because you don't have demands from other people. You can basically do whatever you want and create whatever you want for no specific client so I had fun working on that show that's up in Los Angeles right now.

MS: You are very good writer too.

MN: Thank you!

MS: Are you writing something now?

MN: No, I've been thinking—well, I scribble things down but I lose my notes and then I forget where I put them, I should keep them all in one notebook

MS: It was a great book—I really enjoyed it.

MN: I had a tough time with that book.

MS: Really?

MN: Yeah, my cousin, John Terry, who's working on this documentary, was working with PBS and he knew how to do research for documentary films. So I tagged along with him and we actually did research together for the first few years, because he was researching, he wanted to go to Japan. He'd never been to Japan before and he also wanted to go to India; he'd never been to India. I knew people in both countries so we went along together. He would interview people in both places and I sort of picked up what he was doing. And he'd also stay here and rummage around in all the old cupboards and cabinets.

MS: I am sure there was a lot.

MN: Yeah, he'd find old letters and old office records and I thought they were just junk, you know, but he would read them and he'd say, "hey, you know what this means?" "Oh, did you know that your father had this going on when he was in Paris in the thirties?" Oh! No, I didn't know that. I never read those old letters. [laughs.] So it was really interesting. That was my first introduction to doing documentary research.

MN: So, that was really fun and I used that material. I started off looking for a publishing company and Christina Grajales is one of our supporters from way back. I think she ordered from dad when she was with The 1950s Gallery in New York, and then she decided to order from me and she sponsored a one-man show—my first one man show in 2006. She ordered a whole set of redwood furniture and one of those pieces hasn't sold yet so it's in California. She was very supportive and she was looking for companies that would want to publish a book on Nakashima. She came up with several different companies because she had travels a lot, the right circles in New York City. She came up three or four different companies that I looked into and it was a contest between Rizzoli and Abrams. I met both of the editors there and John, my husband, thought that the copy was much better and the quality of research and printing and design and so forth was better, with Abrams than with Rizzoli. Rizzoli I thought was awfully good but there wasn't much copy involved and he thought there should be a lot of copy.

MS: Yes—definitely.

MN: So I went with Abrams and I thought I would never get through the project—

MS: How long did it take you?

MN: Well, it was five years but I went through three different editors. The first editor left the company. She thought she would take the project with her but they wouldn't let her so I got a second editor who had done some pretty nice looking books on different architects so I thought he was okay but he didn't like what I was writing. He said I was writing in circles and he wanted a linear book. He tried to rewrite my first chapter and I thought that isn't me, that isn't what I wanted to say! And then he said, okay, we'll just throw out the text that you've been working on for five years and we'll just do a chronology; we'll just have pictures and you can write, you can identify the pictures and that will be the book and I thought, "Wait a minute!" I've been doing this research, you know, for five years-I'm not gonna throw it out the window. Christina Grajales' roommate is a lawyer, and so she went with us and my son, at that time was working with us, so I called him my "manager," and we all trooped into Abrams and met with the editor-in-chief. I said, "This is not going to work. I've spent all this time and money on writing a book and I'm not getting along with this editor and I don't want to do a chronology." They said, "oh, okay" and so they gave me the art editor who was a lady and I got along fine with her.

MS: Yes.

MN: One of my cousins lives in New York so I stayed with her for a couple of days and I took this box—I guess I had sent it in because I don't think I carried it in—full of photographs and she spent a couple of days with me weeding through the photographs and said, "this one will work," "this one won't work." Because I had written so much I had some redundancies but could not figure out how to weed them out. She helped me weed out the redundancies and put it into some form so that each section was sort of self-contained—that they were chronologically logical and so we finally got through. She said—I think it was she who said, "we've got to have more Mira Nakashima history—not George Nakashima history."

MS: Absolutely! That's why I really enjoy the book. I wished there were more Mira history too.

MN: Oh, well, thank you very much. [laughs.] It was hard work, though, trying to do that and run the business at the same time. I don't know if I'd ever want to that again I didn't have time. Every spare minute I had I was working on my book and sometimes I worked all night and of course I would work all weekends. I don't have weekends anyway, I work six days a week. Any spare time was spent on writing the book.

MS: It was definitely worth it, we all enjoyed it.

MN: Oh thank you.

MS: Talking about legacy, you were talking a little bit that one of your sons is involved in woodwork, did any of your children pursue architecture route?

MN: Yeah, one of my children did. My daughter, Maria [Amagasu], before that she never wanted to do anything that mom ever did. She went to McGill in Canada, because she thought it was far enough away from home and then she ended up majoring in architecture. It's interesting because she didn't want to do what I did. She traveled around, I mean she was a real traveler—she did her senior year in Bogota, Colombia. She never studied Spanish—she studied French. I thought how is she going to do that? Anyway, she did it and then she was in India when my father died in 1990. She was working with Balkrishna Doshi at the National Institute for Design in India and then she finally came back and she worked with me for a year and decided that isn't what she wanted to do. So she went off and got her masters at Berkeley in California and then she went to Japan with the JET [Japan Exchange and Teaching] Program and studied and taught there for six years. Her first son was born in Japan, I thought well that's interesting—in spite of not wanting to repeat what mom did. She moved to Winnipeg and she got her degree in architecture and she's practicing full time.

MS: How interesting.

MN: Her family, her husband's family, is there and she likes it there, so she's probably going to stay there the rest of her life. My other two sons were interested in biology and sciences. One of them is a medical doctor in Portland and the other one is in pharmaceutical biological research in Los Angeles. So Ru [Satoru Amagasu] is the only one and he majored in business, you know, finance, business stuff, he has a MBA from Carnegie Mellon, so it wasn't really a good background to be in the furniture business. I think all that education is geared toward the corporate mentality, that sort of thing.

MS: So you didn't indicate to your children that you want them to follow the arts and architecture?

MN: I didn't push them hard enough. I just kind of wanted them to do what they wanted to do.

MS: Did you want them to follow you or was that not what you wanted?

MN: I didn't push them that way and now that I'm looking back at it, I probably should have. [laughs.] Well, my daughter sort of did that on her own and that's what she wanted to do, but she didn't want to work with me.

MS: How about the grandchildren, is there any of them interested in what you do?

MN: I'm hoping—there is some hope for the grandchildren. Because my oldest grandson is fourteen, he'll be fifteen in March, and he wants to come and work with us next summer, and I'm hoping that works out. Put him through some kind of apprentice, sped up apprentice program.

MS: Is there any other family member who is involved in a business now? Is your brother Kevin [Nakashima] involved?

MN: Yeah and my daughter-in-law, my son's wife [Soomi Hahn Amagasu], has been working with us for eight years. She's not in design, she's in the office and she seems to like it okay. But she doesn't question my authority I guess. My son questioned everything I did.

MS: It's getting late, but I want to touch on briefly about what you commented earlier today. About your father's idea about arts, craft and design and their relationship. So where does the Nakashima furniture fit in?

MN: Ah the eternal question. [laughs.]

MS: The reason why I ask is it is designer crafted object but it's prized as a fine art at this point and inaccessible to most of the people who might want a Nakashima piece. I wanted to hear your thoughts on this relationship between arts, crafts and design, and where your furniture fit in.

MN: Well I want to look at it from the historical perspective. I think philosophically dad was very much in tune with Soetsu Yanagi and the Mingei movement in Japan. He felt that the people should—he established his business as a protest to modern technology, to mass production, to the egotism of modern art and architecture. It was sort of anti-American sort of way of doing things. Although it was very much like the Arts and Crafts movement, it was parallel to the arts and crafts movement, and he was made a fellow of the American Craft Society [American Craft Council], it was a dubious honor. He did not really agree with them because their interpretation of art and craft was different from dads and dad used to speak in a disdainful way of the “artsy-craftsy” approach to things. I think with the American Craft Society and the American Craft movement it was neither art nor craft and it was non-functional. Dad just had issues with it because it didn’t make sense.

I think he went into furniture because he had issues with the way architecture was being done. It was too design oriented, everybody was very concerned about having it be a good design, but it was not always buildable, I mean that’s why he had these organic engineered shells on the property because he could oversee the buildings every single day that it was under construction. He thought the only way to get good quality architecture is if the architect was actually involved in building. So he left architecture in the forties because he didn’t like the way that architecture was being done in the U.S. He had been in India and Japan, where craftsmanship was part of the architectural tradition and he didn’t think that was part of the American architectural tradition so he wanted to manifest a craftsmanship aspect of it, through furniture, because it was easier to control the products from the beginning to the end and he felt that was important. You shouldn’t have to farm it out to engineers and contractors and you have to bend over backwards to please clients because then you’d end up with something you weren’t happy with. So I think I’ve finally figured out how to reconcile the art, craft and design debate. I think any piece of art manifests the unity of art and craft and design. I’m not convinced that what’s called craft in the U.S.A. now actually does that. A lot of it is maybe well crafted, but it’s not well designed, and some of it you know I don’t think some of it is even art. But because it’s expensive it might be called art.

MS: Right.

MN: But I think the beauty of my dad’s tradition is that he had a very firm grounding in engineering, because he was in architecture before he went into furniture design. He had a very clear idea of design because of the architectural training. A lot of furniture makers nowadays, don’t have an architecture training for one thing, but even the design training nowadays is a little hokey sometimes. I was at Parsons on a jury this spring and there were eight projects which I was supposed to be on the jury for. One of the projects I felt very badly about because it didn't look to me like, and a lot of the people on the jury said the same thing, it can be built. And it seemed to me that he had done everything without even drawing, without trying to make a model, he had done it entirely on the computer. You kind of lose touch with reality when you do that and with craftsmanship you have to be in touch with reality, it has to be buildable. Thomas Moser has gone off the deep end, I mean they do everything with a CNC machine. Thomas Moser himself said they use metal and plastic and that isn't what he wanted to do when he first started this business, he was very much in the Shaker tradition when he first started and they've gone far away from that now. I guess you have to do that to keep up with modern times but I went up to visit his factory in June and it's a factory, it's no longer a workshop, and it's very dehumanizing. It's not as bad as I guess as most factories—

MS: Your father and you both worked with a manufacturer at some point.

MN: I haven't worked with a manufacturer.

MS: What is your view, because a lot of people want Nakashima furniture. I would love to have one myself but it's too expensive. [laughs.] But if there is some way to have part of the furniture factory made, or maybe if there is some way for you to expand the manufacturing, you can get the furniture to more people.

MN: Yeah we were trying to do that with my son. But people nowadays associate Nakashima with what they call one-offs. Everything is individually designed and crafted and made specifically for them, so what we had thought would be a semi-manufactured line that my son would be in charge hasn't taken off at all. We took it to *Architectural Digest*, we took it to Neocon last year and we've tried to promote it and it just hasn't taken off. I mean we would like to be able to. There's just the way these things are made there's no fast way to make them. Knoll has taken that chair over there which is a straight back chair, and mass-produces that, but that's the only one. And then there are knock-offs for the Conoid chair. They're being made in Southeast Asia and they're fairly inexpensive—so if you want a Nakashima knock-off—[laughs.]

MS: It has to be the real thing. [laughs.]

MN: The Knoll chair is actually true to the design, it's just the manufacturing is different.

MS: So the material is different, the finish is different?

MN: The construction is different. Well the construction is basically the same but it's put together by machine and it's a catalytic varnish and the wood is steam dried and so it just looks different and feels different because it's not handmade.

MS: So you have no plan of expanding your workshop?

MN: We cannot expand here because we're just as big as we are and we're bigger than we're supposed to be as far as the zoning board is concerned.

MS: Oh I see, okay.

MN: My son may want to do that some time and he may be able to figure out how. I haven't figured out how, and it's probably too late in my life to do anything that radically different. It's a tough thing starting out something new like that.

MS: You said that you still have young people coming in as apprentice, right? What kind of background do they have and where are they coming from?

MN: We're hiring people who are quite close by. The one young man who came in a couple of weeks ago went to the George School where my sons went to school. His parents are landscape architects in the area, they're from a Quaker background and they actually worked on my mother's memorial garden, at Chandler Hall and they're very sensitive to the eastern way of doing things. They're involved with Sri Aurobindo people and are involved in that philosophy. This fellow who's with us, has worked in construction, he's a carpenter, but he's worked on his own for a number of years. I think he's had some design training, I forget exactly where it is, but he, wanted to come in and learn some finer points of furniture making and he's got a very strong work ethic. He seems to be a good hard worker and honest and humble and cheerful, and that's important. We'll see how it works out—he doesn't have a whole lot of skills as far as the workshop goes but he seems to be a quick learner, and he's young. The next person who's coming in has had a lot more experience in the furniture factory but it's all kind of mass production and he's wanted to get into something that's a little more sensitive. He has a lot of training though on the machines which is really good.

MS: Great. So last set of questions has to do with Japanese American identity. How did your father view his Japanese American background? You said he never spoke about the concentration camp. Was it something he had conflict with? Obviously that was inspiration for many of his work.

MN: I think dad was unusual. Rather than rejecting his Japanese heritage, he embraced it whereas most of the nisei rejected it because of what happened during the war. They were treated so badly that they didn't want to think about anything Japanese. But dad said the war experience made scars, but they healed over. He had spent quite a bit of time in Japan, he was best friends with Junzo Yoshimura who taught him and took him around to a lot of places in Japan which he thought were wonderful. They were the old fashioned Japanese, it wasn't the tourist scene and so he learned about Japanese culture and he also stayed at his grandmother's home in Kamata, where I also stayed. He had contact with a number of Japanese and never gave that up. He was always very proud of his Japanese heritage, which most Japanese Americans were conflicted about, and I think he was much closer to the Japanese, than the Japanese Americans. They belonged to the JACL [Japanese American Citizens League] in Philadelphia, but I was never a part of that. I have very little experience with Japanese Americans because there weren't any here and I went to school in Japan.

MS: Right, so you feel the same way?

MN: Yeah I feel the same way. I think we are probably both much closer to the Japanese in Japan than we are with Japanese Americans in the U.S.

MS: Did you raise your children with that in mind? Their father is Japanese—

MN: I didn't raise them consciously trying to reconcile the two cultures but it got to be very conflicting, he was from a very traditional kind of Japanese family in which women were subservient and didn't think on their own and stayed home and cooked and cleaned. I was working part-time over here and not doing a very good job cleaning—

MS: It must have been very difficult.

MN: It was, and actually my children, you know, realized that conflict. I think I'll turn on the lights for us, it's getting dark in here.

MS: Yeah, thank you so much. Almost finished, I'm sorry I kept you so long.

MN: No, I kept you long.

MS: No, you are very generous with your time—and thoughts really. I appreciate it. So the very last few questions have to do with your future plan. What is the next project you're working on?

MN: The only thing I really have for next year—I may be going to California again to work with Wendy Maruyama. We've become friends through Furniture Society and different shows, in *The Art of Gaman* in the Renwick did you see that?

MS: No.

MN: It was last summer. And it was collection of arts and crafts, which people had made when they were in the camps during the war.

MS: Oh really?

MN: They sent me the catalogue and I thought well so what? This is just stuff that people made—but you realized the circumstances under which it was made and it was very bittersweet. They made these little flowers out of shells because they didn't have flowers—I didn't realize that when I first looked at the catalogue. They're making shell flowers—they didn't have any real flowers so it was very meaningful. Anyway, I got to know Wendy Maruyama pretty well through a number of different circumstances and she asked me to come back. She has done, what she called *The Tag Project*. She was born after the war but she wanted to reproduce every single one of those tags that were put on the Japanese Americas when they were put in camps. Now they had a list of everybody who was in the camps, and she had people help her and create every single one of those tags and I did a few of them. Anyway, she's having a celebration that she's finally finished this project, I don't know what she's going to do with all those tags, but she wanted to have a celebration too and thank people that helped her in San Diego, so I might go there in March. I'm not going out just for that you know unless there's something else I can do at the same time and plus I'll get to see my grandchildren. [laughs.]

MS: Are you involved in any design projects right now?

MN: Well I may be. I visited my cousin in Portland, and there's that beautiful Japanese garden there, have you seen it?

MS: No, I have not.

MN: And they get so many visitors a day, a year that they have to expand. They have a Japanese architect who's designed a new addition that it's modern architecture but it's built like an old fashioned Japanese village so there's not one great big building sitting out in the middle of the garden. They may want some Nakashima furniture—I hope. [laughs.]

MS: Did you do the furniture for the Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo by the way? Is that from you?

MN: No, that's probably from our associates Mr. Nagami who has the Sakura Seisakusho in Shikoku. Dad's had a relationship with the Minguren since 1964.

MN: We've done ten shows there and their shop is not doing very well right now. They have one shop in the Ginza which is very expensive to maintain but that's where most of their sales have been coming in but since the tsunami and so forth, they have very few visitors come so they're doing not very well, but they did do a number of projects in Tokyo.

MS: Right, I was just there last week and they re-designed a whole guest floor at the Grand Hyatt Hotel with all Nakashima looking furniture—

MN: They're the one company in the world that's licensed to reproduce the Nakashima designs. And it looks a little bit different because they've got different designs—different finishes, different woods, but they're really nice folks—I'm in touch with them a lot.

MS: How about more writing project? Autobiography?

MN: Oh—you'll have to do that for me. [laughs.] Oh there was another project that I'm involved in right now. Which is The Wing Luke Museum. They want to do a Nakashima show. Wing Luke is dedicated to Asia Pacific art and culture in Seattle, so that's happening in July of next year.

MS: Oh great, that makes a lot of sense.

MN: And they wanted to do a show on dad and me I guess, and other furniture makers who have been inspired by dad, and their exhibit space is pretty small and so I don't know how we're going to fit everything in there.

MS: You get to curate it?

MN: Well, actually not. Rachel Kitagawa who has been emailing me, I think I was supposed to get in touch with her sometime, and asking me about different things and there's a committee or something with the museum who calls the shots. It's really hard to make decisions when you're working with a committee, so I don't know quite what we're doing. I was going to say, we have a really big table and set of chairs that's at the Michael Smith Gallery and originally I thought I was going to send that to Wing Luke but if we send that, there won't be any room for anything else hardly so I have to redesign it.

MS: Oh that’s great, that's next year?

MN: Next July. So I have to get going on that.

MS: Great.

MN: it would be nice if I had time to write some time.

MS: I thought that was such a beautiful book and it’s so sincere and it was such an interesting read. You really get the feel of who you are.

MN: What was very interesting for me, after my dad died I was trying to figure out why I was doing this—and why dad was doing it to start with.

MS: Well thank you so much once again for your generosity with your time. It was delightful. I always wanted to meet you, and I thought you would never say yes when I asked for the interview. It’s an honor for me, and I got to see everything!

[End of the interview]

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