



**JUNKO
MORI**

Right: *Propagation*
Project: *Multiple Rosularia*,
wax-coated forged mild
steel, 32 x 44 cm, 2012

REAL STEEL

Junko Mori's work combines her upbringing in Japan with the intellectual rigour of the British education system to extraordinary effect. With a new exhibition about to open at Bath's Holburne Museum, Grant Gibson went to visit her at her studio in North Wales. Location photography by Steve Speller



IMAGE COURTESY OF ADRIAN SASSOON, LONDON



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Above: *Plants Exotica, Chatsworth Chandelier*, wax-coated forged mild steel, 90 cm wide, 2013

Below left: *Moss Passion Anemone*, wax-coated forged mild steel, 90 cm diam., 2008

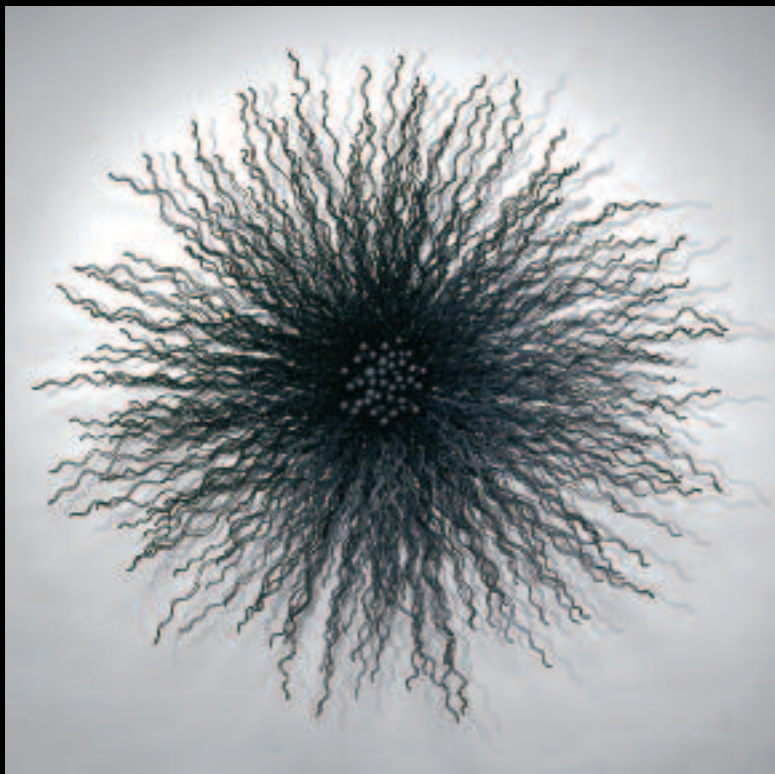
Below: *Propagation Project: Multiple Rosularia*, wax-coated forged mild steel, 31 cm high, 2012



Above: *Spring Fever: Spring Poetry*, forged fine silver 999, 17,5 x 41 cm, 2013

Below left: *A Silver Organism: Square Spike*, forged fine silver, 12,5 x 13 cm, 2010

Below: *Uncontrollable Beauty: Hydrangea*, forged fine silver, 24 x 28 cm, 2012



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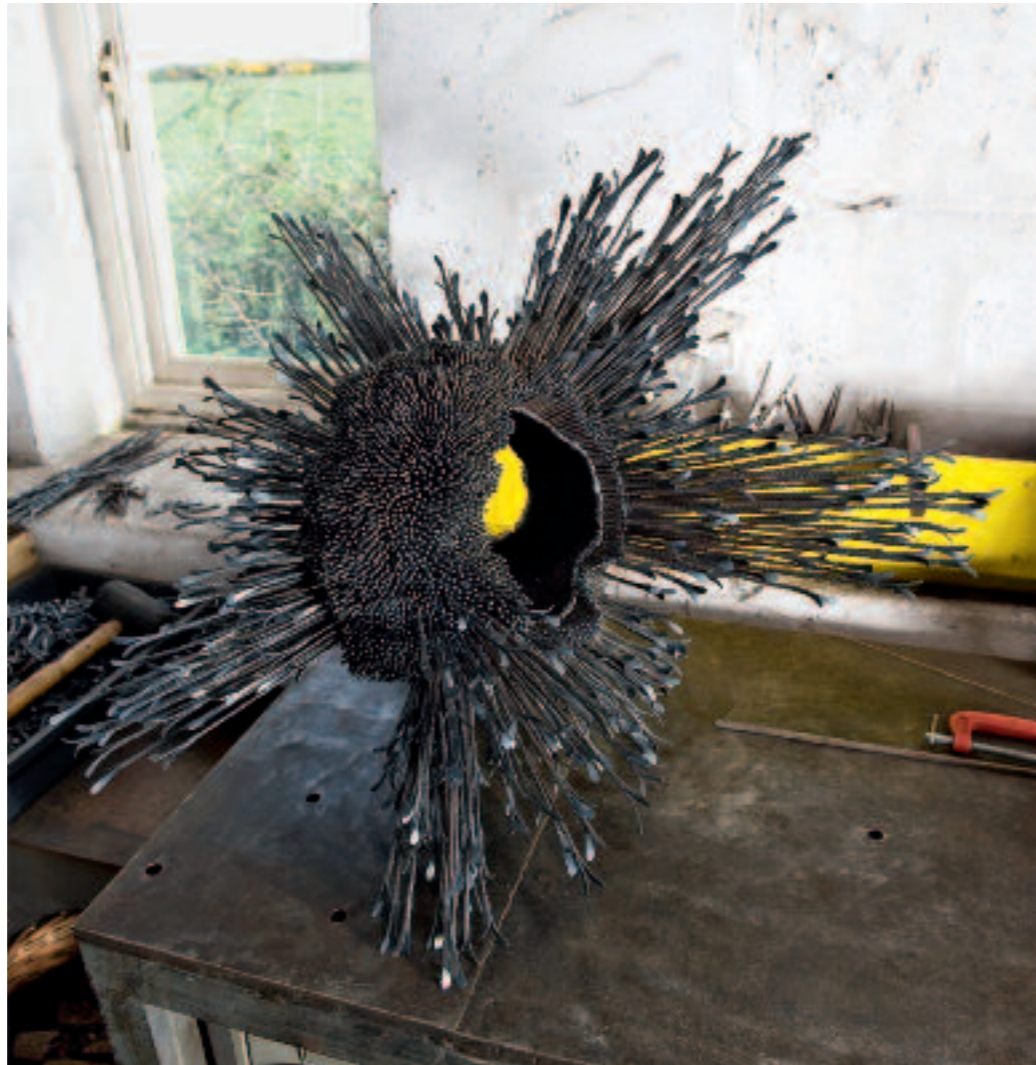
'Lots of people are surprised; my workshop is quite manly,' says Junko Mori, as we walk towards an outhouse adjacent to her home on the coast of North Wales. And, without in any way wishing to sound politically incorrect, she's not wrong. Open the timber doors, painted a rather fetching shade of lime green, and it's chock full of the kind of gear that makes a certain type of grown man dewy-eyed. However, between the gas tanks, the welding machines, the pairs of protective gloves, the jamjars full of components, the vast collection of hammers, sheaves of steel rods and sundry paraphernalia, what really catches the eye is a new piece she's working on, sat on a bench by the far window.

At first glance, *Sprout* resembles an exploding star, with particles shooting off at different lengths from a hollow core. The petal-like tips on the longest strands make them look as if they're about to bloom. It's made from well over 1,000 steel rods (more usually specified to reinforce concrete for building projects) in five different sizes (1.5-3.5 millimetres in diameter), which have all been beaten with a hammer to give them an individual texture before being welded to a central ring. It's extraordinarily intricate and – though it still needs to be shot blasted and waxed – wildly beautiful.

It also represents the first piece from *Propagation Project: Coppiced Wood*, a new trio of works to be exhibited alongside existing pieces at Mori's first solo show, held at Bath's Holburne Museum this month. Inspiration for the series came from the gardens around the back of the museum itself, where she discovered some trees which she describes as 'oddly too huge'. 'Actually to me it's not natural,' she continues. 'Lots of people go to Hyde Park and think it's beautiful, but actually it's quite trained nature. It's not a forest. It's not wild.' This notion of manipulating nature led to her researching the processes of coppicing and finding parallels in the way she creates her own pieces. 'I'm always distorting nature to make what I want to make,' she explains.

It has to be said there's something intriguingly incongruous about finding this petite, charming Japanese maker living on the North Wales coast. She was born and raised in Yokohama, where her mother worked as a school nurse, while her father was on the design team of JVC, developing the guts of VHS recorders and home projectors. 'My dad is a very fidgety man,' she says, 'and he fixed things all the time. He had a little shed in the back of the garden and there he used to make everything. Dad used to expect my brother was going to do it, but I was the one following him around.' A fascination with making emerged at a very early age, it seems. 'When I was little my mum said I never wanted any Barbie dolls,' she confirms. 'It's funny I didn't want toys. You know Sellotape? And paper and pencils? That would be what I wanted.'

Working in metal came later, as she studied three-dimensional design at Tokyo's Musashino Art University. Initially, it was the sense of challenge that appealed. The course included working with ceramics, wood, textile and plastic – but as she says, 'The one material I struggled with was metal.' This need to put herself in unusually uncomfortable situations has developed as something of a pattern in her life. It's there in her work-



JUNKO MORI

Clockwise from above, across both pages: Propagation Project: Coppiced Wood / Sprout, wax-coated, forged mild steel, 53 x 68 cm, 2013; Mori's workshop; TIG welding process on the third piece from Coppiced Wood series; hand-forged mild steel components before assembly



ing process, for instance. Though she does draw – she shows me some of her work that she keeps stored in the caravan in the back garden – the sketches don't act as a blueprint for her pieces. When she begins to create a new object there's no plan – instead she prefers to work on her intuition. The *Coppiced Wood* piece I'm looking at, for example, started with a ring and grew from there.

As we leaf through her old files from a decade or more ago, you can tell the repeating patterns come from the same place as her 3D work, but as she points out: 'If I put these drawings on the wall, it becomes a fact, doesn't it? If it's stored in my head, it's going to be distorted and changed. Then when I'm making, making is my outcome.' So these old drawings, inspired by plants and propagating seeds, act as a starting point for a one-woman, visual version of Chinese Whispers, using the mutations in her memory to create new objects.

It sounds a risky way to work, and I wonder if her pieces ever go wrong? 'I've got so many of them,' she replies. 'Often I chuck it on the floor, try not to think about it, and then a year later I might start work on it again. That void period is actually good for me because I start liking this oddly grown creature. So I let them grow again. Actually,

they always become the best pieces in the end.'

It also means that attempting to write a press release predicting what she is going to make can be a hit or miss affair. The official blurb for the show says the *Coppiced Wood* pieces will be 'significantly larger in scale than previous work' but the example in front of me hardly seems massive, and nor does the second piece, inspired by a tree's root system and taking shape on a bench nearer the door. When I quiz Mori on this she laughs: 'I said it was going to be big, then the curator said it's going to be "significantly larger"'. But it's not. The scale is part of the process as well. So it ended up... a bit –' She hesitates for a moment, looking a little guilty, '– not... that large.'

After Musashino, she applied to do an MA, but found that her work sat awkwardly between craft and fine art. 'Lots of people were still stuck in this argument about what is art and what is craft. I didn't bother. I didn't care,' she remembers. 'As a maker I believe we don't need to define what we do. I don't call myself a craftsperson or an artist. My CV is Junko Mori/Metalwork. But I never call myself a metalworker, because that's pigeonholing myself.' So having failed to find a place, she worked as the only female member of staff at a fabricators

for nine months, doing lots of welding, helping construct stuff and fixing boiler tanks. 'I didn't have time to make arty things but it was a nice break to be honest. But my skill, my welding skill improved so much. Because every time we were fabricating new things, like temple shrine gates, all of a sudden a staircase, then tiny bicycle parts. You never learn something like that in university.' She saved enough money to head for the UK and, despite her lack of English, applied to Camberwell, where she was interviewed by Hans Stofer. She was given a conditional offer, but told she needed to pass an English exam within six months before the course started.

The university proved to be something of an eye opener. While her tutors in Japan were more interested in the technical side of making, 'Camberwell was totally conceptual. A discussion about why, why, why.' Taught by the likes of Stofer, Steve Follen, Amanda Bright and Simone ten Hompel, she describes the experience as 'Brilliant. Such a fantastic team. So scary.' That familiar aesthetic had already taken shape, building a piece up by welding together smaller components, to make it grow with an unerring but occasionally untamed grace, but as she says: 'I was doing it but I didn't know why I was doing it. The conceptual clearness wasn't there. At Camberwell I established that.'

Initially, her plan was to head back to Japan once the course had finished, but Stofer pushed her into staying by recommending her for the Next Move scheme, funded by Arts Council

England (formerly the North West Art Board) and the Crafts Council, in 2001.

In many respects this was a defining year. She started experimenting with silver – encouraged in this by silversmith Chris Knight while on a residency at Liverpool Hope University – and also met her principle dealer, Adrian Sassoon, at the Crafts Council's Chelsea Craft Fair. 'Adrian was standing in front of my stand 10 minutes before opening time. And he said: "That one, that one, that one, that one. Can you put the red sticker on for me?" And then he walked off. I thought it was the security guard teasing me.'

After Liverpool, she started a studio in Manchester, where she stayed for seven years, before moving to her current home to raise her young son, Dennis, with husband John Egan, himself a designer-maker in wood. 'I'm kind of a hybrid culturally,' she says, 'because I was educated here and in Japan too. So what I do is probably a bit different from Japanese artists who never left Japan. But probably I'm very different to British makers.' While there are similarities between the two cultures – Mori points to a certain stiffness and liking for etiquette – the UK, she says 'has a healthy curiosity. I think British open-mindedness really attracts me.'

Interestingly, she believes having a family has changed not only the way she works, but the finished pieces as well, making her work stronger in the process. 'You have to be so efficient,' she explains. 'I used to work stupid hours – 10am to

10pm, something like that – but having Dennis I've realised it's best to have 9am-5pm.' The effect of this is that she is more focused. Intriguingly, it has also made her consider her own mortality. 'Time is precious. Every piece is precious now. Before I didn't have that tenseness. It's good positive tension though.'

After Bath, she's doing a steel chandelier as part of a group exhibition at Chatsworth, alongside furniture designer Gareth Neal and textile artist Ptolemy Mann. She spent two days researching botanical books in the Duke's library. 'There are lots of chandeliers in the Chatsworth house,' she says. 'There's lots of silver gilding and gold and crystal chandeliers, but I didn't see any steel ones. I wanted to make something quite elaborate and gorgeous, but in steel – a chandelier that's inspired by plants in the garden or from the botanical books I researched there.' As a result, six lightbulbs will be surrounded by a forest of different forged elements that required her to create 140 new components.

She's an intriguing character, is Junko Mori. By her own admission she isn't a David Clarke or a Simone ten Hompel. Her work isn't about stirring craft's intellectual pot or rattling cages of tradition. Yet by the same token time and again she's shown a willingness to embrace risk and to challenge herself materially and culturally. Behind the beauty of her work is an artist who possesses real steel. '*Coppiced Wood: New Work by Junko Mori*' is at Bath's Holburne Art Museum from 6 July – 8 September 2013. For details, see *Crafts Guide*. www.junkomori.com