

ARTIST BIO

RUTH CHARLOTTE KNEASS AT HOME IN THE MATERIAL WORLD

“If I had to choose three guiding stars along my creative path, they would be Bolinas, MoMA’s Vienna 1900 show, and Akira Minagawa — whose artistry permeates everything he touches.”

In 1962, John Glenn became the first American to orbit the Earth, the Beatles released their debut album, and Ruth Charlotte Kneass was born into a family of artists, carvers, and boat builders in a rural community south of San Francisco.

As a young girl, Ruth helped her mother create leather goods and candles to sell at local flea markets, a nascent expression of her affinity for embracing new techniques and materials with fearless curiosity. After studying industrial design at SF State and silversmithing at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, Ruth returned to the Bay Area in 1989 to set up her graphic design, fashion, and accessories studio, Kneass Boat Works (which is still a going concern). A decade later, Ruth accepted a job designing and producing displays for Banana Republic’s worldwide fleet of stores, where she worked for more than twenty years. “It was a groovy distillation of my industrial design background and the negotiation skills I picked up as a youngster at the flea markets,” says Ruth, who continued expanding her skills with classes in woodcarving and enameling at The Crucible, the Oakland-based industrial arts school.

An early member of the Burning Man tribe, Ruth’s projects often incorporated driftwood she foraged along the lagoon in Bolinas — the funky West Marin town that has long attracted free spirits, artists, surfers, iconoclasts, and San Franciscans seeking an off-the-grid retreat. Some of the wood she sent to her mother, who was then making mobiles with an earthy, organic vibe. “I would gaze up at them over my bed and imagine how I might express myself using this form. How could I create something linear, modern, and — for lack of a better word — Zen? It hit me that attaching the string directly by drilling right through the pieces would allow the floating forms to orbit smoothly without any additional hardware. Of course, back then, I never realized how much this would all grow — *literally*,” Ruth adds, followed by an arpeggio of her trademark fluting laugh.

GIANTS

Ruth embarked by making mobiles on an intimate scale, working out the balance points and the ideal way to gird their poetic, meandering quality with a steely, mathematic rigor. Having mastered that, she began exploring new materials and making work on a massive scale — an ongoing series she dubbed *Giants*.

When an early driftwood *Giant* that Ruth had secured to an ancient cypress tree on the Bolinas shore caught the attention of artist David Wilson, she was invited in 2010 to contribute to a guerilla group show that spanned many miles of the Marin headlands. “I was primed to go beyond that gnarly, craggy, found wood, and to fabricate the smoother, more refined and classic shapes that really turn me on,” says Ruth. She took one of her smaller pieces, scaled it up five times, and determined to carve the pendulous pieces out of rosewood.

“I found some gorgeous specimens through my friend Evan Shively at Aborica, and he warned me that because of rosewood’s density, it’s not ideal for beginners. Well, I had to laugh, because the only thing I had really carved before that was marble — so I felt pretty comfortable.” Ruth first flirted with marble in 2007, when she attended her first International Marble Carving Symposium in Marble, Colorado (where the stone for the Lincoln Monument was quarried) and has been working with it ever since: “It turns out, I have an aptitude for taking a 300-pound block of yule marble and finding the form inside.”

Rendered from rosewood, elm, oak, marble, concrete, black basalt, cast bronze, rope, bamboo, aluminum, brass, blackened steel, and more, her hanging sculptures measure up to a majestic 14 feet. Interactive and kinetic, they invite viewers to stroll through and around the work, which may be animated by a gust of wind or a push of the hand, cantilevering out and seeming to defy laws of gravity. “Of course, people often want to reference Calder — although his work doesn’t inform anything I do — as he’s the only mobile artist many people recognize,” she says with a shrug.

The immersive process of creating a mobile on a massive scale engages Ruth’s penchant for drawing, carving, composing, balancing, and rigging. In her ready embrace of new materials, Ruth has become comfortable wielding a hammer and chisel, chainsaw, and Arbortech (high-speed carving tool) and designing for a CNC router. And, as befits someone with a boat-building background, she is adept at operating a sailing block and tackle to hoist individual pieces when fine-tuning the essential balance, as they are too heavy to manipulate by hand.

Ruth has also been learning to operate a lathe at Tripp Carpenter’s legendary Bolinas-based furniture studio Espenet, where she is stoking her obsession with long tapered drop shapes for a new series of elm and oak mobiles, which are proving to be her most demanding balancing challenge to date.

USEFUL THINGS

While the mobile form will always be part of Ruth's repertoire, she has expanded her practice recently to the design and fabrication of a series of *Useful Things* — a distillation of her passion for nature, science, and crafts movements of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries.

When Ruth saw the show *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture, & Design* at the Museum of Modern Art, with room after room outfitted with work by the Wiener Werkstätte — the collective of artists and craftsmen that created everything from silver and ceramics to furniture and fashion — the aesthetic expression across a multitude of mediums hit a chord. "I remember motifs floating on walls, across carpets, creeping up banquettes and down lampshades. It excited me to create a similar environment." Having had a lifelong fascination with the cosmos, Ruth imbued her next body of work with motifs evocative of the night sky.

Useful Things, which debuted at the Jones Institute in San Francisco in 2021, offered the artist an opportunity to try her hand at everything from furniture to wallpaper. "These stools, tables, clocks, lamps, and hanging objects are my way of bringing the wonders of distant planets and other heavenly phenomena into closer range," explains Ruth, who has plans for installations in Tokyo (at Curator's Cube) and Kyoto, at the jewelbox gallery of her aesthetic hero, Akira Minagawa — whose revered brand Minä Perhonen embraces fashion, textiles, artwork, furniture, jewelry, and tableware.

Ruth's latest grouping of artful objects also offered her a chance to delve into new materials and processes. Nesting ceramic **Moon Tables** incorporate hand-carved lunar tiles (the raw material was gifted by Heath Ceramics) that extend beyond the tables' steel edges. From the leftover clay scraps, Ruth fashioned a collection of **Totems** that can be displayed *en masse* or rearranged at whim. And the heavenly black basalt and yule marble heavenly bodies comprising **Planetary Alignment** suspend from the ceiling on rope secured with a floret-like crown knot (taught her by a member of the International Guild of Knot Tyers, Decorative Knots Division).

Ruth then worked beside master wood turner Tripp Carpenter at his Mount Tamalpais studio to create the sycamore and monkey paw wood faces for her **Dark Star Clocks**, which she stained midnight black with Japanese sumi ink before inserting brass rods to mark the hours and laser-cut brass pointers for the hands. Ruth had six needles in play to attach the black and white Napa shearlings to her **Moon Stools**, whose laminated wood legs allude to classic Scandinavian profiles. And at night, light seeps through an equatorial opening in the **Deep Space Lamps**, whose reflective spun brass interiors cast a warm glow.

Much like her artistic mentor Akira Minagawa, Ruth sees opportunities for artistry everywhere she looks, from the wild coastal land of her beloved Bolinas, to the infinity of the universe — keeping her at once grounded and celestial, and open to everything the world has to offer.

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Deborah Bishop (Original article published May 24, 2021).

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