

# Nao Matsunaga

## A Year's Thought

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Open 26 April 2025



*Family of Yew, 2025, Yew*

## Chance Element

### Introduction by Laurie Britton Newell

You could describe Nao Matsunaga as an impatient person; someone who travels a lot, works fast, mixes materials, and makes many pieces at a time. This new body of work at Roche Court also allows us to see Nao's still side. Since 2020 he has returned many times to work on the wooden sculptures made of oak, yew, and beech taken from trees on the estate, including some that have fallen during storms. He has spent a lot of time in these intervening years walking around the woods and talking with the people that live and work here. He is drawn to the idea that things have an innate sense of what they are, and a story to tell. This is why he enjoys working with found materials, he tries to help articulate what these things want to say about themselves.

This is visible in works such as the *Family of Yew*, (2025). He describes this as the "surrender" aspect of this practice, an accidental encounter that leads to a new piece of work.

There is a beautiful tension to be found in the wall series *In These Days of Quiet* (2025) where Nao has quickly drawn in coloured pencil around the bark rings of slices of beech, bringing a present-day immediacy to the ancient past life of these trees.

Nao graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2007 and although he is always open to new materials, ceramics remain central to his practice. Irrespective of the material he is working with he seeks to find and introduce unpredictability into the process of working with it. He describes this as 'the chance element'. Working with a piece of wood that has started to crack as it dries, rather than attempt to fix or fill it, he draws our attention to it by carving more fissures around it, such as the chisel lines visible in *Creep Together* (2025). In works like *Time Matters Differently* (2025), areas where the wood had started to rot become starting points for Nao to excavate, to cut away, and follow the journey of the form that emerges.

Engineered unpredictability is evident in the ceramic sculptures. Working with uneven thicknesses of clay, or by mixing different bodies together, such as porcelain and stoneware; as he has done in *Still Alive* (2025), he encourages some parts to shrink and collapse during the firing. In the *Beast from Shigaraki* (2022) he has added feldspar rock into the glaze because he wanted to see how it would react in the kiln, and was unsure of what the outcome would be.

The titles for these works are also an assortment of chance elements. Taken from things he was listening to, or heard while making the work, were jotted down in a notebook at the time, and he has returned to them recently to name these works. Central to Nao's way of working is this process of collecting, storing, and then bringing together; adding a wedge or a word here, balancing this with that. It's all a juggle between chaos and order, restlessness and patience.

**Laurie Britton Newell is an independent curator and art consultant who works across the fields of art, design, architecture and health for public museums and private clients around the world. She has over 25 years of experience in exhibition making, curatorial strategy, art commissioning, cultural master planning and inclusive public programming.**

**She has worked as a Senior Curator at Wellcome Collection in London where she oversaw the work of a curatorial team. Here she curated exhibitions such as '1880 THAT: Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader (2025), 'In Plain Sight' (2023), a season 'On Happiness' (2021), and 'Somewhere in Between' (2018). She previously worked on rural public art projects for Black Cube in Colorado, USA, and taught curatorial studies at the University of Colorado.**



Tower of Wishful Thinking, 2017

Glazed porcelain

30 x 20 x 17 cm

*Twirling Again 1, 2025*

Holm oak

54 x 58 x 35 cm



*Creep Together, 2025*

Holm oak

60 x 57 x 36 cm





*Beast from Shigaraki, 2022*

Glazed ceramic, Feldspar

32 x 39 x 24 cm



*Next 2 Nothing, 2019*

Glazed porcelain, wood, acrylic paint, pencil

117 x 88 x 37 cm



*We Shall Not All Sleep, 2025*

Pine, paint

205 x 41 x 34 cm

*Smile!! If U Wanna*, 2017

Glazed porcelain

33 x 33 x 20 cm



*Flabber*, 2017

Glazed porcelain

25 x 29 x 24 cm







*Time Matters Differently, 2025*

Yew

182 x 74 x 40 cm

*In These Days of Quiet 1, 2025*

Beech, pencil

80 x 80 x 10 cm



*A Thin Trunk of Things to Come,*  
2025

Beech

97 x 115 x 15 cm



## Nao Matsunaga *A Year's Thought*

Text by Timothy Revell

Nao Matsunaga is known to the world as a ceramist of fantastical yet delicate architectural porcelain. One look at his aptly named *Tower of Wishful Thinking* (2017) showcases his shining white glaze adorned with whimsical calligraphic colour. At the same time, the work still maintains its sculptural solidity, and its right angles means it becomes a playground for light and shade, shadow and shine – for wishful thinking. Even Nao's smaller pieces provide amusing curves, contemplative negative space, and sharp reversions. *His Smile!! If U Wanna* (2017) makes the beholder do just that. One smiles but is captivated with the eye. This is emblematic of Nao himself. A person who can merrily laugh and who can also spend days alone with his work.

Since 2020, Nao has spent time at Roche Court in the guise of Apollo chasing Daphne. That is, his object of obsession briefly became the trees of Roche Court, and he took to carving branches, stumps, and large pieces of wood into sculptural totems or thin slabs, one of which he calls *A Thin Trunk of Things to Come* (2025).

This idea of time is one engrained into the place of Roche Court, the home of the New Art Centre since the 1980s, and the home of works by Richard Long, Edmund de Waal, and Richard Deacon. Roche Court itself has fused historical architecture with modern art and life. Nao seeks to bridge historical porcelain with modern collage and highlight transformed earth, both through ceramic, and now in a singular moment of shaping nature's fallen adjuncts.

**Timothy Revell is an art historian at the National Gallery, London. He worked for the Roche Court Educational Trust on the Articulation initiative from 2018-2022 and continues this work at the National Gallery. At Linacre College, Oxford, he was the John Bamborough Msc Scholar in the Humanities, he was also a Medal Winner in Art History at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario). From the Austrian Academy of Sciences he was awarded the Bader Prize in Art History for his doctoral thesis; *The Art of Rubens and the Poetics of Comedy*.**

## **Nao Matsunaga**

### **Biography**

**1980** Born in Osaka, Japan  
Currently lives and works in London, UK

### **Education**

**2005 – 2007** MA Ceramic and Glass, Royal College of Art, London, UK  
**1999 – 2002** BA (Hons) Wood, Metal, Ceramic and Plastic, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK

### **Selected Solo Exhibitions**

**2022** *Pseudo Stone Phenomenon*, Komagome Soko, Tokyo, Japan  
**2022** *Hybrid of sorts/hybrid of thoughts*, Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix, London  
**2020** *Panta Rhei to Curtis LeMay*, Token Art Centre, Tokyo, Japan  
**2020** *Deepcuts*, Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK. Curated by Anthony Shaw  
**2018** *Raw Faces*, Crafts Study Centre, University for Creative Arts, Farnham, UK  
**2017** *Blue & White*, New Art Centre, Salisbury, UK  
**2017** *18 and Over*, Nao Matsunaga and James Rigler, Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK  
**2015** *Standing on the Verge/Live Up*, British Ceramics Biennial, Stoke-on-Trent, UK  
**2015** *Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral*, Galleri Format, Oslo, Norway  
**2015** *Monster Rock Circle*, Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK  
**2014** *Live Up/Blank Totem*, London Design Festival at the V&A, London, UK  
**2013** *We Are New Here*, Arizona State University Museum, Combine Studios, Phoenix, Arizona, USA  
**2012** *My Primal Memory*, Daiwa Japan House, London, UK  
**2012** *Stones and Bones*, Marsden Woo Gallery, London, UK  
**2008** *This Place is Made of Rocks*, Konstfack, Stockholm, Sweden  
**2006** *Bath and Doorway*, Hockney Gallery, Royal College of Art, London, UK

## Selected Group Exhibitions

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| <b>2024</b> | <i>Time Capsule: Yoi Kawakubo and Nao Matsunaga: Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix</i> , London, UK<br><br><i>Influencer</i> , 74th Arts, Milan, Italy. Curated by Maya Binkin<br><br><i>Artefacto</i> , Festival Internacional Cultural, Coatepec San Jeronimo, Mexico |
| <b>2023</b> | Nakanojo Biennale, Japan   |
| <b>2022</b> | <i>Folly</i> , Dulwich College, London, UK   |
| <b>2021</b> | <i>Off-Centre 29th International Symposium of Ceramics</i> , Bechyně, Czech Republic   |
| <b>2019</b> | <i>Gillian Ayres, Rachel Jones and Nao Matsunaga</i> , New Art Centre, Salisbury, UK   |
| <b>2017</b> | <i>Things of Beauty Growing</i> , Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA touring to Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK  |
| <b>2017</b> | <i>Museum of Together</i> , Spiral Building, Tokyo, Japan  |
| <b>2014</b> | <i>Ceramic Object</i> , Galerie Format, Oslo, Norway   |
| <b>2013</b> | Award Show, British Ceramics Biennial, Stoke-on-Trent, UK  |
| <b>2012</b> | <i>Jerwood Makers Open 2012</i> , Jerwood Space, London, UK [touring exhibition]   |

## Public Collections

Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK  
York Museum and Art Gallery, York, UK  
Shipley Art Gallery, UK  
Brighton & Hove Museum, UK  
Craft Council UK

## Selected Residencies

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| <b>2025</b> | Shigaraki Cultural Ceramic Park, Japan  |
| <b>2024</b> | Nueva Creta' Coatepec, Veracruz, Mexico   |
| <b>2023</b> | Xenia creative retreat, UK<br><br>Nakanojo Biennale, Gunma, Japan   |
| <b>2022</b> | Shigaraki Cultural Ceramic Park, Japan  |
| <b>2021</b> | Launch Pad LaB, La Boissière, France<br><br>29th International Symposium of Ceramics, Bechyně, Czech Republic |

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|-------------|--|
| <b>2016</b> | Java Contemporary Ceramics Biennale, Yogyakarta, Indonesia |
| <b>2015</b> | National Academy of the Arts, Oslo, Norway                 |
| <b>2014</b> | Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK                       |
|             | Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Minnesota, USA |
| <b>2013</b> | Arizona State University Art Museum, USA                   |

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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