

From Nova Scotia to Japan... and back

Toshiko and Charles MacAdam create extraordinary playgrounds

BY PHILIP MOSCOVITCH

Say you are a Japanese textile artist who has earned acclaim for the giant children's play structures you crochet by hand. And say you met a former art student turned investment banker in Tokyo, got married, and decided to go into business together; where would you decide to set up shop?

For Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam and her husband and business partner Charles MacAdam, the unlikely answer to that question is Bridgetown, Nova Scotia.

Since 1988, when they moved here from Japan, the couple have lived and worked in the small Annapolis Valley town. Here, in a hangar-like workshop five minutes from their home, they dye and braid nylon rope, before fashioning it into extraordinary play structures, each of them unique. Sitting on the floor, Toshiko crochets the ropes into exuberant, colourful pieces that encourage children to climb, jump, run... and scream their heads off with delight.

Although he can trace his roots back to the first Acadian settlement at Belleisle, Charles says when he and Toshiko came to Nova Scotia with their infant son to visit his parents in 1988, they didn't plan on staying. "We had every intention of moving to Montreal, but it just didn't happen. We'd rent a car for the weekend and drive around the province, and we sort of drifted back in this direction, and we just saw this house as we were driving by."

"It was affordable," Toshiko says. "When we saw this broken house I thought, 'Oh, this house needs help.'" Charles interjects, "When she says affordable, that means it was a wreck. When we first turned on the water upstairs, it was raining inside the house."

Toshiko was born in Tokyo in 1940, but when she was three years old, her family moved to Japanese-occupied Manchuria where her father, a doctor, opened a civilian hospital. When the war ended, her family became refugees – and the experience of hardship and the fragility of life would deeply affect her. Seeing death at a young age led her to be aware of the impermanence of life and to do what she loved – not what was expected of her as a young Japanese woman.



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Top: Charles and Toshiko MacAdam create crocheted playgrounds for clients around the world from their home in Bridgetown, NS; working on one of their creations in their hangar-like workshop.



Harmonic Motion at MACRO.

ROBERTO BACCINO COURTESY OF ENEL CONTEMPORANEA



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Tools of the trade: Each playground sculpture requires as much as 1000 kilograms of braided nylon rope, which the MacAdams custom dye in many brilliant colours.

She went to art school in Tokyo, then did graduate studies in Michigan, where she remembers fellow students talking about wanting to become famous—something that didn't interest her. "What's important to me is doing something I like, even if it's hard work—watching all those disasters as a child is a big part of my wanting to do what I like."

Toshiko found considerable success as a textile artist, creating large-scale hand-crocheted works that were displayed in museums and galleries in Japan and abroad. But something was missing.

The decisive moment that would change the direction of her career came in 1970, when two children walked into the Tokyo gallery displaying one of her installations and began climbing on it. "Two children came and just jumped into it! Then they started moving, and the shape changed. It started bouncing and was dynamic," Toshiko says. "I thought, oh my God, I'm going to make a piece for children!"

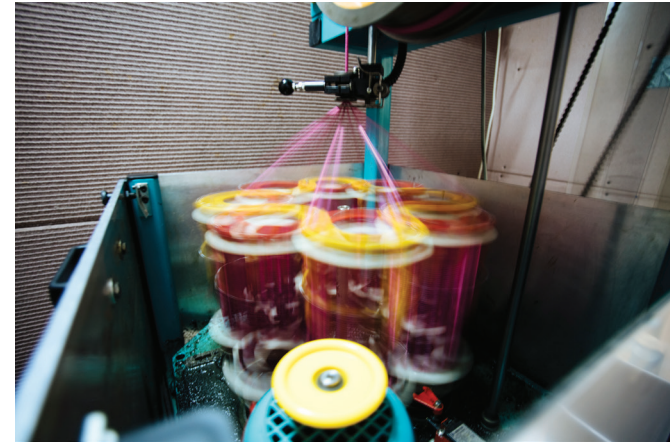
She looked at the state of playgrounds in Tokyo and was appalled by what she saw. "The situation was depressing. Kids were playing under elevated highways, in dust. I thought this is scary. Kids need some space that's not organized—not sports—where you can have a fun time with other kids, even if you're not good at sports."

Her first effort, for a preschool, only lasted six months. But Toshiko says the children loved it, so she knew she was on the right track. In 1979, she received an invitation to design and build the signature piece for a new children's area in a national park in Okinawa. Working with a team of women, Toshiko created a large-scale installation that remains in use today. "This changed the attitude in Japanese national parks. Now many of them have very interesting, innovative play areas," Charles says. "And this was the beginning of it."

Charles, meanwhile, studied at Dalhousie, then went to NSCAD to study weaving and drawing. He was studying there while Toshiko taught a summer course at the school, but the two would not meet at the time. Then, in the late 1970s, he moved to Japan to teach English, before becoming an investment banker. He and Toshiko wound up meeting and getting married, eventually moving to Nova Scotia and launching their company, Interplay Design and Manufacture, which focuses exclusively on building their creative play structures.

In the workshop, Charles shows off the machine, reminiscent of a large colander, he designed for dyeing nylon in six-kilogram batches; a completed play structure might use 1,000 kilograms of rope. Piles of braided rope, each carefully labelled with lot number, weight, colour and other information, lie waiting for Toshiko to crochet them; a task that she can spend up to eight hours a day on in the studio.

Charles says, "We started in our attic in the house, then expanded into our neighbour's backyard, then her garage."



Knitted Wonder Space 2 at Hakone Open Air Museum.

The couple have just completed a replacement net for a play structure in Tokyo that wore out after eight years. Next, they'll be building a new project to be installed in Dubai, then working on one for a residential community in Florida. "Considering how close we are, people say the States should be our natural market, but it's never really taken off there," Charles says. Instead, their works have found homes in countries including Japan, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, China, and Italy—in parks, museums, and even outside shopping malls. The pieces are made, step by step, in the workshop, but the final installation—often involving 14-hour days—takes place on site. "We can't duplicate the exact way it's going to be tensioned here," Charles says.

Toshiko clearly loves creating for children. While some artists pour their emotions into their art, she describes her work as "very dry and very calculated. There are no emotions—we just make it. But the emotion comes when kids get into it. Oh my God!" she says, laughing. "How you live is important. I'm more interested in being joyful every day than in fame or money. Our work is hard physically but it's what we like to do."

She also teaches part-time at NSCAD, and appreciates the contact that brings her with young artists – particularly those whose paths may have been crooked. "At my age it's like teaching grandchildren," Toshiko says. "There are students who don't fit in at a university, but are very creative and interesting. They have struggled, but are often very creative. I have fun with them."

Working out of Bridgetown presents some challenges, including finding and keeping staff. That's becoming more of a concern, as the MacAdams age. Charles says, "You have to adapt when you get older to allow yourself to keep working, making things physically less strenuous, and developing ways to have other hands involved. If we stop, that's it—that's the end of it."

And even though the MacAdams moved to Bridgetown more or less on a whim, Toshiko has grown to love it. "I love shopping at Frenchy's. I have good eyes, and I can pick out things. It's almost like treasure-hunting. The whole thing just soothes me. I like living here quietly." 🐾