



# ROSANNE SOMERSON

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Fluid/Solid

November 10 – December 16, 2023

Gallery NAGA

67 Newbury Street • Boston, MA 02116  
[www.gallerynaga.com](http://www.gallerynaga.com)

Cover (clockwise from top right): *Bench 1*, 2023, imbuia, Baltic birch plywood, upholstery foam, custom printed woven cotton fabric, 20.5 x 47 x 21"; *Bench 2*, 2023, whitened sycamore, Baltic birch plywood, upholstery foam, custom printed woven cotton fabric, 20.5 x 47 x 21"; *Bench 3*, 2023, black walnut, Baltic birch plywood, upholstery foam, custom printed woven cotton fabric, 20.5 x 47 x 21"



## ARTIST STATEMENT

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“Nothing is softer or more flexible than water, yet nothing can resist it. ” – Lao Tzu

Rowing in the quiet waters of a remote lake in rural Maine, I feel the structure of the water. It is both a surface, mirroring the sky and the thick growth of shoreline trees, and a volume, changing its depth and color masking a world of life beneath—loons, fish, water plants. This sensation is familiar, as I spend a lot of time exploring this lake. Water patterns and distorted reflections also remind me of woodgrain, and the decades of working it with planes, chisels, and rasps. I have studied the maps of lines and patterns in the wood that reveal growth conditions of the trees, and I see similarities in the water that surrounds and carries me.

Although my career has been centered around the wood studio, I began my artistic interests as a photographer. For decades, alongside making furniture, I've made photographic images but always compartmentalized them as disparate, though mutually informative investigations. My photographs influenced the compositions in my objects, and my object-making helped me to see images as a medium that can be sculpted or abstracted through the camera. This current body of work, “Fluid/Solid”, challenged me to combine these processes directly, to investigate opportunities created by their intentional interactions.

The fluidity and permeability of water allows a freedom that I often crave when confronted with the solid nature of wood. My camera allows me to capture and manipulate what I see, and to create a contrasted companionship between things like rippling water and concentric tree growth rings. Both reflect growth and change as well as fluidity and solidity in their distinct ways. These associations inspired me to create my own fabrics for the first time, applying my ideas to a new form of tactility. The fabrics allow another level of abstraction in the making process, applying the images to woven textures, that are then paired with particular woods and finishes to offer an experience of softness and contrast.

Developing ideas through photography and drawing allows my studio practice to evolve in wilderness spaces where I perceive differently. Spending time outdoors teaches us to listen and observe deeply, to use our bodies in ways that push us beyond our comforts, to experience a heightened state of our perceptive senses. The ingenious and extreme adaptations in nature, the elegance of growth and proportion, the sense of constant discovery at different distances and scales, all inform elements that I imbue into my work. Whether immersed in the water directly, or observing the light stroking across a vast surface when viewed from an airplane, I get so inspired by seeing differently. Back in the studio, I play with combinations of natural and manufactured materials and of images with forms. I apply built solutions in partnership with natural manipulations.

I like the work to reflect this complexity while remaining accessible. I want to create work that helps people to experience or see the familiar differently, maybe helping them to jar a duality in their own lives and make sense of it, or maybe even experience something completely new through interactions with these pieces.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I was fortunate to build this body of work with the amazingly talented Tyler Inman, whose astounding abilities allowed us to translate any idea into the best possible built representation. Tyler, I cannot begin to thank you enough. No crazy concept was too challenging, no experiment questioned, no problem left unsolved. Mark Bokelman was also a tremendous and sensitive contributor as the pieces evolved. I also thank Brooks Hagen who gave me the confidence to create my own fabric for the first time, as well as Edward Meade who expertly helped me with the digital interpretations and programming. To Michelle Millar Fisher, thank you for your insights and willingness to drill deep into my story, contributing your beautiful essay to this catalogue. And, finally, to Meg White for being such a patient and supportive gallery director throughout the process.

## DEDICATION

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This exhibition is my first solo show in decades, and would not have been possible without tremendous support and inspiration. From my past, I want to recognize the late Alphonse Mattia, who assisted me in finding my way in this field, helped to build amazing workspaces, and provided many years of direct and indirect learning and encouragement.

In the present, my family has always understood this part of my identity as who I am. They were so pleased to see me turn decades of administrative service back into my studio practice. Isabel, Annie, Maggie, you reminded me that it was time. I love you all dearly.

Jonathan, you are the most amazing partner, believing in me in every way and at every falter. Your expansion of my thinking and understanding has helped me to be a better artist. With your love of the wilderness, and the inordinate amount of time that you wish to be on or in the water, I have experienced the outdoors in new, inspiring ways. And you continually challenge the intellectual questions that have driven ideas and that keep me growing.

Little Noemi, you have brightened the light that helps us all to see the universe differently, as pure joy, discovery, hilarity, and gentle kindness. You are the future, and I hope that in some way you will see your “Nana Rose” through these works in a lasting way down the road...





*Wall Vanity* 2023 Baltic birch plywood, sycamore, sycamore veneer, pearwood, ash, ebony, printed leather, mirror glass 30.25 x 9.5 x 33"

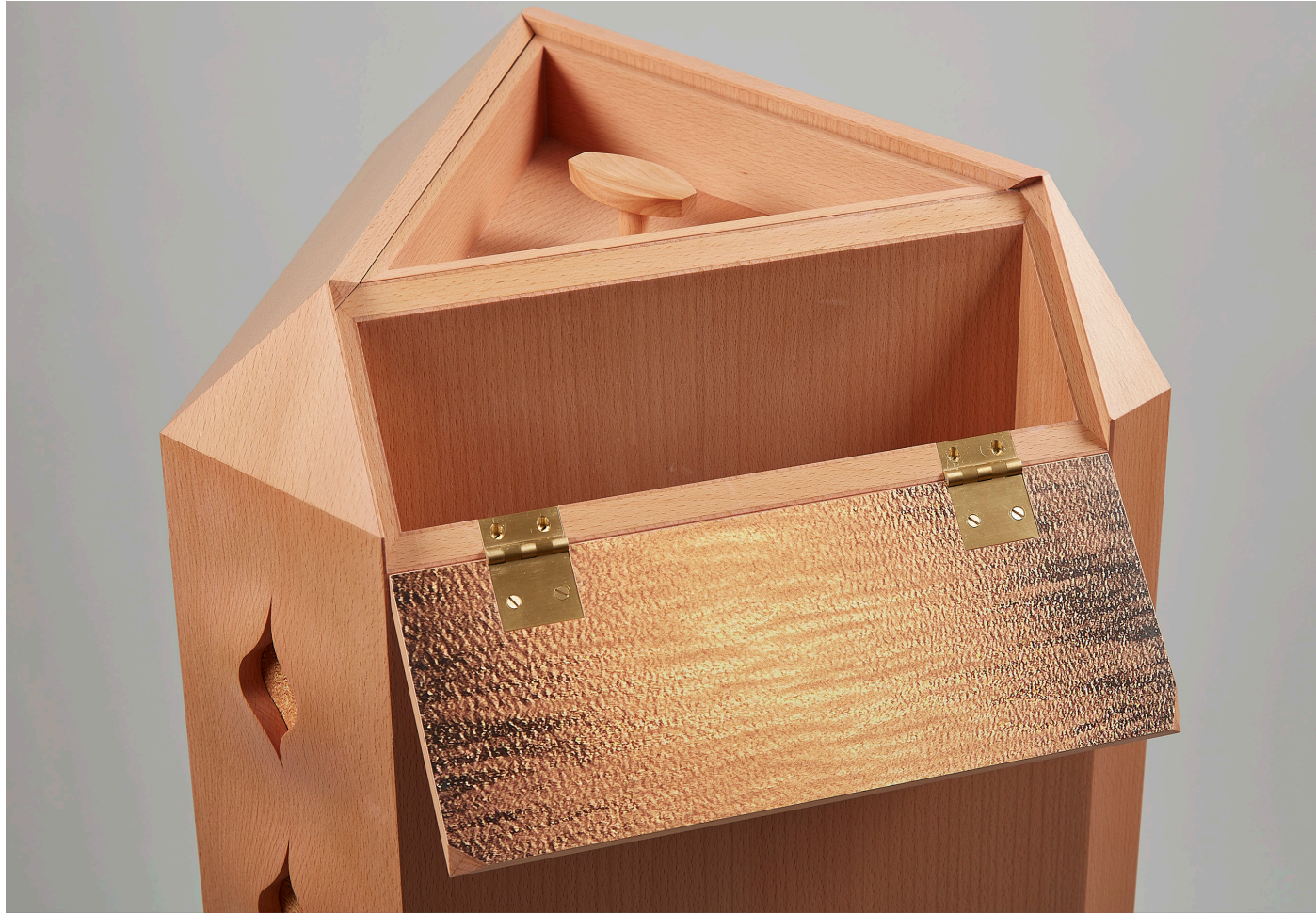






*Mail House* 2023 Baltic birch plywood, beech, beech veneer, printed veneer, imbuia, brass  
51.75 x 16.25 x 12"









*Bench 1* 2023 imbuia, Baltic birch plywood, upholstery foam,  
custom printed woven cotton fabric 20.5 x 47 x 21"

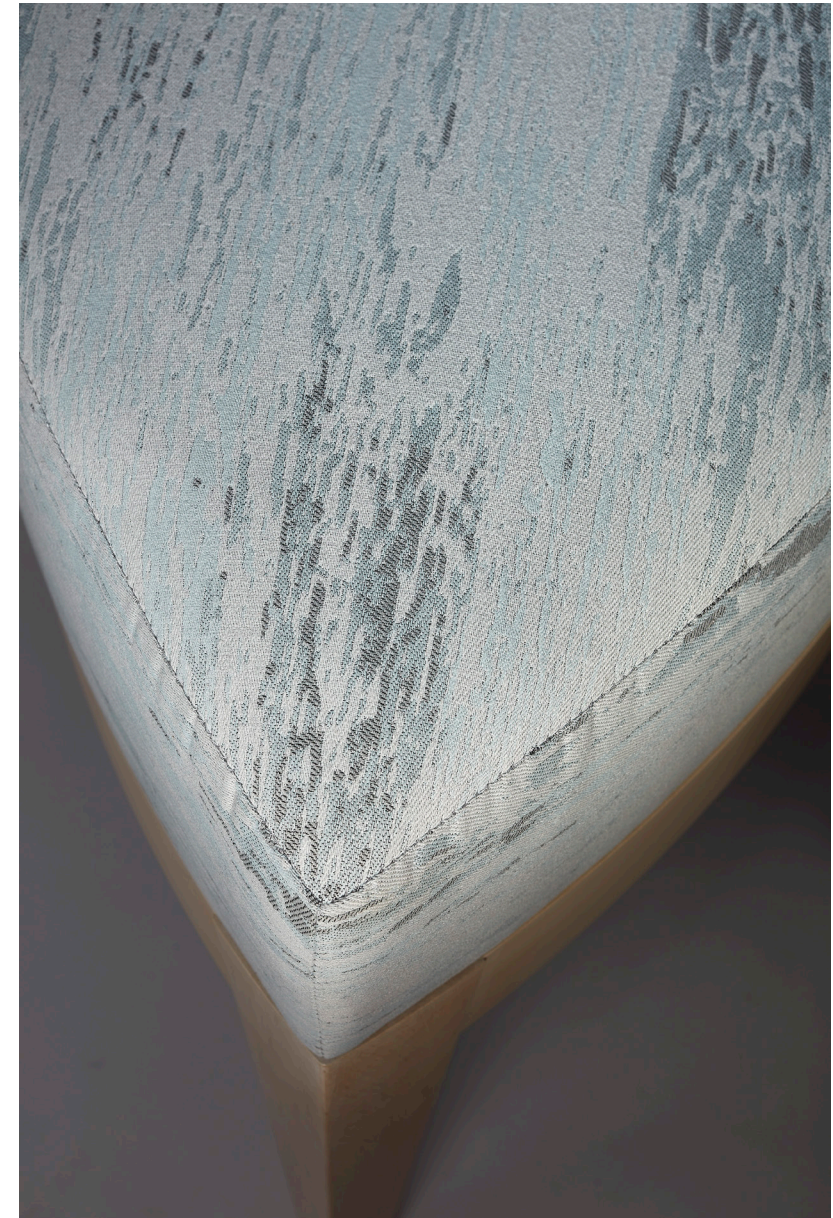


*Bench 3* 2023 black walnut, Baltic birch plywood, upholstery foam,  
custom printed woven cotton fabric 20.5 x 47 x 21"





*Bench 2* 2023 whitened sycamore, Baltic birch plywood, upholstery foam,  
custom printed woven cotton fabric 20.5 x 47 x 21"



# RIPPLE EFFECT

**Michelle Millar Fisher**, Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts within the Contemporary Art Department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Wander through the contemporary wing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston just now and you'll encounter a gallery devoted to the theme of care and adoration. In it sits a curvilinear bench of pearwood and soft curly maple cushioned in plush blue Velluto Pelle leather. Made by Rosanne Somerson in 1986, it evokes the type of *chaise lounge* on which eighteenth-century French Empress Josephine might have reclined. Its strong, insistent legs jut slightly outward like Egyptian pylons at the entrance to a temple and recall the aesthetic (and colonial) obsessions of her husband. The abstract decorative motifs that decorate the side of the bench—a squiggly line, a jagged triangle, an amorphous blob—tip their hat to the quixotic postmodern playbook that was at the heart of experimental architecture and design in the decade that it was crafted.

It sits opposite another powerful work, the eight-panel twenty-four-foot-long *Resurrection* (1977) by the painter Joan Snyder, now in her 80s

and still, like Rosanne, ferociously active. Mimicking the form and scale of religious painting, Snyder has collaged 1970s newspaper articles that testify to pervasive male violence against women, children, and older people.<sup>1</sup> Across the panels, a painted moon transitions to a blazing sun. This shift from dark to light explores personal and cultural experiences of violence and its after-effects, contextualizing today's MeToo movement in a longer historical arc.<sup>2</sup>

I sit on Rosanne's bench often, which is unusual to be able to do, because it's an artwork on display in a museum gallery. It is permitted since the work belongs to the MFA's Please Be Seated program which has, since 1975, invited artists to make seating for museum visitors to enjoy.<sup>3</sup> As I sit there, I often think of Rosanne and Joan, and of how hard it had to have been to excel, as they both did, in their respective disciplines, so dominated as they both were—and, in some ways, still are—by men. The start of their careers was a period in which second-wave feminism

flourished and women laid claim to the workplace in increasing numbers. It was also a time when art school faculty were predominately male, as were the artists whose work made it into museum collections and gallery shows.

As I sit on Rosanne's bench and take a rest in the middle of my own work day, I have wondered more than once when they got to take a rest at my age and stage. Where was their care, their adoration, their moment of sinking into softness?

Reading back through her oral history interview kept at the Archive of American Art in Washington DC (part of a prestigious series of such conversations preserved within the craft field in the early 2000s), I am struck that Rosanne initially resisted any kind of gender-based interpretation of her work, concerned that it would pigeonhole her. In that respect, she reminded me of a certain generation of late twentieth-century women artists who were required to act like the boys in order

to maintain their ability to make work and move it out into the world.<sup>4</sup>

It was a fair stance to take. As Diedre Visser's excellent recent book, *Joinery, Joists, and Gender: A History of Woodworking for the 21st Century*, reminded me, *Objects: USA*—the seminal 1969 Smithsonian craft exhibition that launched and cemented countless careers in the late twentieth century—didn't include a single female working in wood. Things didn't get better in the 1970s as a new wave of artists emerged in that medium, and it took Rosanne and peers like Wendy Maruyama to break such barriers.<sup>5</sup>

Over time Rosanne decided to own her experiences as a woman, as a mother and caretaker, and as an individual artist with a biography uniquely hers that shaped her approach to her practice. She recognized that doing so paved the way for others to do the same, a way of modeling behavior that became increasingly important as

<sup>1</sup> They were gathered over many months by Snyder, her mother, and her female friends from newspapers all over the country.  
<sup>2</sup> Acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston almost forty years ago in 1986, this is the first time we've included *Resurrection* in an exhibition at the Museum.  
<sup>3</sup> The powerhouse curator Jonathan Fairbanks founded it with a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1975. Like Rosanne's, these benches and chairs are part of the MFA's permanent collection but can also be used by visitors to take a pew. Now in its fifth decade, this ongoing program has generated seventy works by thirty-seven artists—among the very first of which was the late, great Tag Frid, Rosanne's own mentor and a revered teacher at RISD.

<sup>4</sup> The late, great Austrian artist Maria Lassnig comes to mind who is said to have demanded the same salary as Josef Beuys, her teaching peer at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna in the 1980s.  
<sup>5</sup> As Visser notes, "The same glaring oversight would repeat in craft survey shows throughout the next decade: 1972's *Woodenworks: Furniture Objects by Five Contemporary Craftsmen* and *Craft Multiples* in 1975 included no women. In 1979, *New Handmade Furniture: American Furniture Makers Working in Hardwood* organized by the American Crafts Museum [now MAD in New York] ... featured thirty-seven woodworkers, including two women." See Diedre Visser, *Joinery, Joists and Gender: A History of Woodworking for the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2022), 113.



# RIPPLE EFFECT (Cont.)

**Michelle Millar Fisher**, Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts within the Contemporary Art Department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

she took on the role of educator alongside that of an artist.<sup>6</sup>

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Near a waterfront criss-crossed with industrial bridges near Battleship Cove in Fall River, Massachusetts, a large former warehouse is now home to artist studios. One of its floors is occupied by Rosanne and, once upon a time, her former husband, the late Alphonse Mattia worked there, too. In 2006, they combined forces with two of their friends, Charlie Swanson (a former grad student of Rosanne's) and Eck Follen to convert this 10,000 square foot space into a collective woodshop—larger, even, than its equivalent at RISD.

Here, Rosanne has been steadily working over the past few months in careful collaboration with one of her longtime studio assistants, Tyler

Inman. The pieces made for this exhibition at Gallery NAGA are a culmination of everything her 1986 bench at the MFA promised: a cogent and individual expressive style that is recognizably specific even as it is varied in form and conceptual underpinning.

Inspired by forms in nature and in some instances employing her first medium of photography—of water ripples, waves, and reflections—she has built a new body of work that is as beautiful as it is assured.<sup>7</sup> A low coffee table with six leaf shapes spanning out across its surface is finished in copper. Benches are covered in custom-designed and woven fabric. Open one of the drawers of the hanging wall vanity with a mirror and you'll find custom printed leather in their bottoms. An imaginative mail cabinet for an entryway invites care, play, and exquisite design into the everyday.

<sup>6</sup> As Rosanne noted, “I was a little reluctant always to be kind of categorized as this “woman woodworker,” because I really felt like it just so happened that I was a woman. Early on, I wanted to sort of deny that and just be like anyone else in the field. Later, again, I reversed that decision and actually realized how much of the content of my work does come from my being female. That was sort of something I grew into.” See Oral History Interview with Rosanne Somerson, August 7, 2006 and June 22, 2007. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>7</sup> Photography was the medium to which she applied to school. She first began working in a darkroom as a teenager under the tutelage of one of her older brothers who, by the time she was in high school, was traveling with Junior Wells and Muddy Waters and B. B. King as well as photographing Woodstock. She then went on to rural Denmark for a year, tempted by an advert in the back of a New Yorker, before finding the RISD woodshop during a winter session and her lifetime mentor, the renowned Danish woodworker Tage Frid.

Each conveys the method that Somerson once described as producing what she deems her best work: ideas that “come from who knows where, and I make them and they work.”<sup>8</sup> In the precision and virtuosity of medium, finish, and form, it is evident that even if her ideas are not overworked, they rest upon deep knowledge of precedent. This is, after all, an artist who grew up visiting Winterthur and then worked in close community with the phenomenal museum collection at RISD, home to rich holdings of furniture that spans centuries.

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In the process of writing this essay, part of which was drafted on my holiday home to Scotland, Rosanne wrote to say that the next time we see each other, she would love to tell me about her cooperating experience in the Hebrides. “First woman to complete a barrel in Scotland,” she wrote in an email exchange. She has been a pioneer in many other ways.

Born in Philadelphia in 1954, she grew up just

outside that city until she moved to Providence in 1971 to attend the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) where she began in the Industrial Design program before branching out to the furniture woodshop. Nine years later, invited back to teach, she eventually began to push (and *push*) to make furniture its own major. She finally made it happen in 1995. She moved the existing MFA in Furniture out of Industrial Design and made it its own track, complementing it with an undergraduate curriculum. Instead of being solely connected to the woodshop, it meant that furniture making embraced materials and ideas of all kinds. It was no small feat. It lives on today and has produced generations of talent.<sup>9</sup>

Her own career has been as expansive as the curriculum she designed, embracing both the cloistered arena of fine studio furniture and, especially in her co-founding of DEZCO, mass production pieces (DEZCO made, among other things, the dormitory furniture that housed many cohorts of RISD students). Somerson went on to become president of her esteemed alma mater

<sup>8</sup> See Oral History Interview with Rosanne Somerson, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>9</sup> “There was a clear and growing interest in furniture design that I didn't see being addressed in the existing curriculum in industrial design. There was no, sort of, sequential way to study furniture design, and the furniture studios, which were at the advanced levels, were by lottery. So a student that wanted to come in and actually study furniture couldn't be assured of a—in my view—proper curriculum in furniture design.” See Oral History Interview with Rosanne Somerson, Smithsonian Institution.

# RIPPLE EFFECT (Cont.)

**Michelle Millar Fisher**, Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts within the Contemporary Art Department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

from 2015-21 and has mentored generations of students in craft and design, especially women working in wood. All this from someone who was refused entry to a woodworking class as a middle schooler because of her gender.

I write this having returned from train trips across all forty-eight continental United States where I visited over one hundred craft schools of all shapes and sizes. More than once Rosanne's name was evoked. Unlike in her generation where there were few, if any, women in the woodshop, and almost none in visible leadership positions, I can now point to a veritable efflorescence: Laura Mays heading up the Krenov School in the Californian redwoods, Alison Croney Moses here in Boston at the Eliot School, Audi Culver and Ivy Siosi with their own thriving practice in Indiana, Annie Evelyn at Virginia Commonwealth University, and Kimberly Winkle at the Appalachian Center for Craft in Tennessee. In a recent conversation with Annie she noted the impact Rosanne had on her as a student at RISD, something she is increasingly cognizant of as she teaches in her own classrooms now: "I've met so many women

since then who didn't have these mega female woodworker influences in their life. I didn't even notice it at the time, but when I look back ... she was the boss."<sup>10</sup>

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Nearer the start of her career, in April 1988, Rosanne was included by Nina Stritzler-Levine, then an assistant curator at the American Craft Museum (now the Museum of Arts and Design), and gallerist Bernice Steinbaum in *Pioneers & Pioneering: 20th Century Women Furniture Designers & Furniture Designer/Makers*. Their exhibition included the work of modernist designers including Charlotte Perriand and Eileen Gray, Shaker furniture, and contemporary artists Gail Fredell, Kristina Madsen, Judy Kensley McKie, Wendy Maruyama, Wendy Stayman, and Rosanne.<sup>11</sup>

The next year, five of these contemporary female makers (including Rosanne) were included as part of a roster of twenty-five artists in the MFA Boston's seminal *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers*, organized by curator Edward Cooke. In this regard,

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Annie Evelyn conducted by the author in June 2023.

<sup>11</sup> According to an article in the *New York Times* "Home and Garden" section, the exhibition was conceived following a case of misattribution. "A prominent gallerist dedicated to promoting the careers of women, Steinbaum was confident that her office swivel chair was designed by Le Corbusier until Stritzler-Levine informed her that the chair was actually a design by Charlotte Perriand." Anne Carlisle, "This is My Work: The Rise of Women in Woodworking," *American Craft Inquiry*, Volume 2, Issue 1. <https://www.craftcouncil.org/post/my-work-rise-women-woodworking>.

Rosanne was part of a wave of artists whose work in the craft field challenged the anxiety that existed around the decorative arts in a museum where fine art—painting, sculpture, even photography—reigned. The 1990s were boom years for the exhibition and acquisition of fine furniture, and her work was celebrated in the galleries artists of her generation strove to be noticed by. First it was at Richard Kagan and then Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia and then, in New York, at Pritam and Eames, Workbench Gallery, and the prestigious Peter Joseph Gallery whose exhibitions and attendant catalogs rivaled contemporaneous museum efforts.<sup>12</sup> Rosanne was one of the few women whose output created a market for artwork that had more commonly (and shortsightedly) been devalued because of its historical and meaningful association with craft.

The late critic and philosopher, Arthur Danto, pointed to the myopia of such a hierarchy when he positively reviewed Cooke's exhibition for

*The Nation* in 1990. In framing his praise for an exhibition that was "alive to the referential powers of furniture as a bearer of meaning" and "radiant with a collective intelligence, wit, knowledge, expressiveness, skill and beauty," Danto traced the history of denigrating the decorative arts in modern art history back to Sandro Botticelli's late fifteenth century panel painting, *Primavera*.

Originally part of an elaborate settle (in Italian, *lettucio*) in the bed chamber alcove of a Florentine patron, Danto notes that art historians have venerated the painting without acknowledging it as a component of a larger piece of furniture. The latter element has been consigned to anonymity, "as if the boundary between the bottom edge of *Primavera* and the upper edge of the lettucio's cornice was a metaphysical boundary that divides spirit from crass body—as if, indeed, lettucio and painting together compose a kind of monster, like the centaur, half beast and half human."<sup>13</sup> Cooke's exhibition and the

<sup>12</sup> "He was literally investing. He was giving us stipends to create new work against our sales, and so we had the ability to hire assistants, to buy the best materials, to do really grand-scale pieces. The most ambitious pieces of my career are the Peter Joseph pieces, because I was able to afford to build them. And he did really beautiful catalogs for every show, with designers like Pentagram. He also was very concerned with bringing in a new group of writers to write about the field, so that the essays in some of those catalogs are some of the best ever, and brought a level of interest in writing and scholarship to the field that it was sorely needed at the time." See Oral History Interview with Rosanne Somerson, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Danto, "Furniture as Art," *The Nation*, April 23, 1990.



# RIPPLE EFFECT (Cont.)

**Michelle Millar Fisher**, Ronald C. and Anita L. Wornick Curator of Contemporary Decorative Arts within the Contemporary Art Department at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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artists within it, including Rosanne, had finally challenged the idea that furniture did not belong in the world of fine art. In her time at *Fine Woodworking Magazine*, she strove to document this shifting scene, too.<sup>14</sup>

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What does it take to build a life as a fine furniture maker? To take on the highest leadership role at the nation’s premier art and design school? To make a family and to be part of a community, with all the joy and grief and exhaustion and ambivalence that entails? While we can look closely and appreciate Rosanne’s new body of work for its formal and conceptual merits alone, like any piece of furniture, it holds the embodied memory and experience of her brilliant arc of a life, too. How could it not? It, too, has legs, feet, shoulders, and arms. In Rosanne’s hands, it also has soul.

Pursuing her drive to create an educational environment that would catalyze new generations of fine furniture makers and juggling it with her own practice as an artist who loved to make, exhibit, and sell her own artwork was a balancing act. As she noted, “for years, because I had

small children, I had to have a studio close to home so that the kids could play outside, and I could watch them, or they could come inside and work.” In many ways, it could so often be a see-saw weighted in the direction of RISD and other responsibilities rather than her own studio.

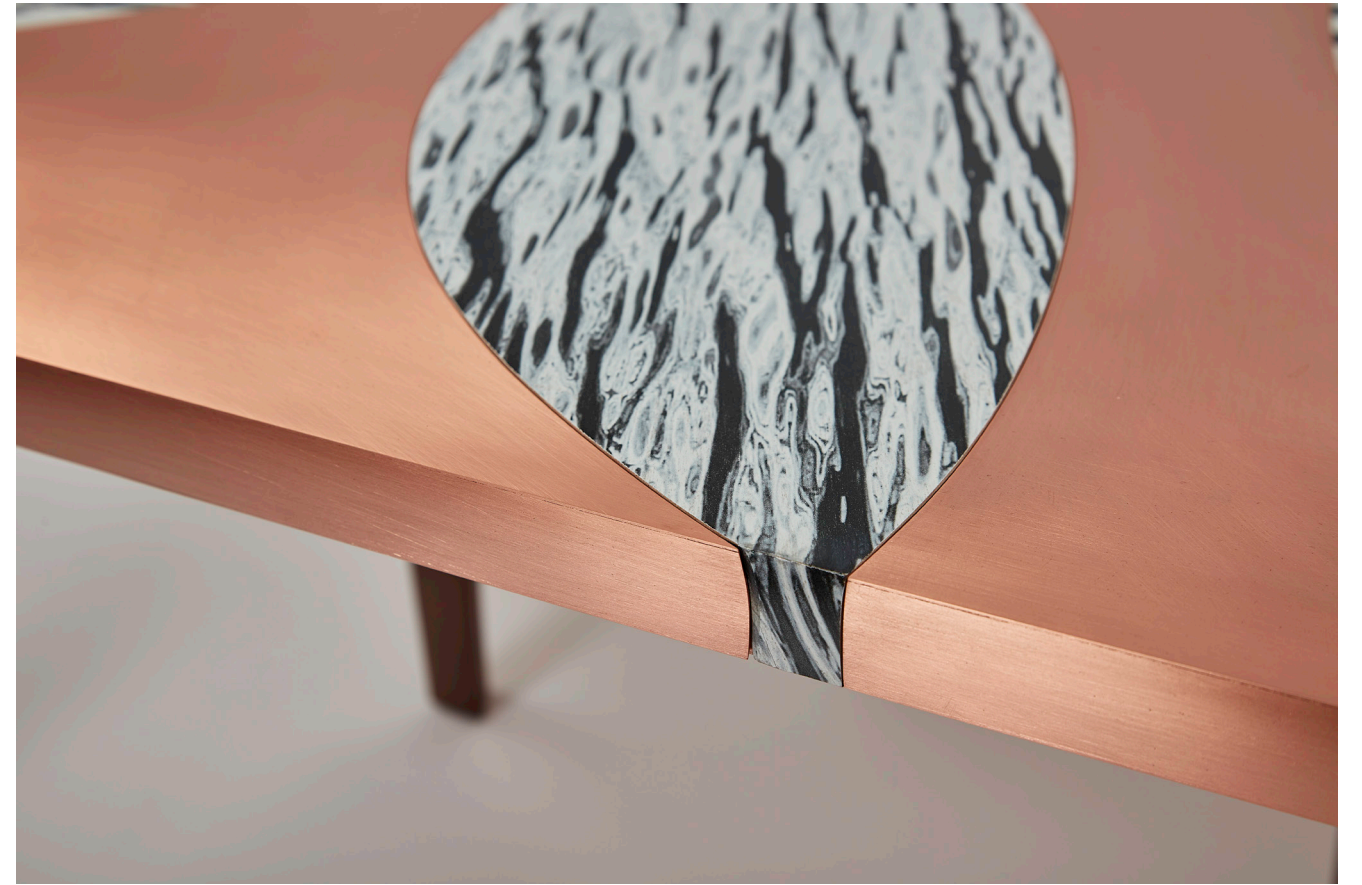
The body of work you see at Gallery NAGA is a signal that the scales are truly tipping in the other direction. For that I am glad because there’s nothing better, nothing that moves me more as a curator, than a woman in the prime of her life making and doing exactly what she wants and lighting a pathway for others coming in her wake. *That* is a ripple effect.■

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14 See Rosanne Somerson, “Woodcraft Scene: Cooperative Shop Group Shares machinery, skills,” in *Fine Woodworking Magazine*, summer 1977, 26.



*Copper Leaves Table* 2023 Baltic birch plywood, copper, aluminum,  
printed and plain veneer, imbuia 19 x 48 x 30"





*Ripple Ribbon Table* 2023 Baltic birch plywood, leather, glass, cherry, beech veneer, copper  
16.75 x 26.75 x 26.5"



*Side Table 1* 2023 Baltic birch plywood, leather, glass, pearwood, beech veneer, printed pearwood veneer 16.75 x 26.75 x 26.5"





*Water Ribbon Table* 2019 cherry, aluminum, digitally printed maple 36 x 48 x 30"







*Wall Sconce* 2023 curly maple, printed glass, LED electronics 16.5 x 16.5 x 3.5"



*Wall Sconce* 2023 lacewood, printed glass, LED electronics 16.5 x 16.5 x 3.5"





*Wall Sconce* 2023 cherry, printed glass, LED electronics 16.5 x 16.5 x 3.5"



*Wall Sconce* 2023 maple, printed glass, LED electronics 16.5 x 16.5 x 3.5"





*Sideboard* 2023 Macassar ebony, pearwood, printed leather 34 x 63.25 x 17"

# ROSANNE SOMERSON

## SHORT BIO

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A designer/maker and academic leader, Rosanne Somerson has been advancing art and design for decades. After establishing a successful studio design practice, she returned to Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) to teach. and eventually co-founded the Furniture Design Department before serving as Department Head, Graduate Program Director, Provost, interim President, RISD's 17th President, and now President Emerita.

An author and subject of many podcasts, she frequently speaks and writes about the power of art and design as core elements of critical thinking, making, and humanity. In her studio workshop she designs and creates furniture for exhibitions and commissions and also explores speculative research and idea development. Her works have been prominently featured in numerous publications and exhibited in major museums and galleries throughout the globe, including the Musée des Arts Décoratifs at the Louvre in Paris, and she is also represented in many private, corporate and museum collections. In addition to her studio practice she maintains an active consulting business, advising on strategic cultural development, creative practices, educational advancement, and design innovation.

Somerson is included in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art Oral History Project and has been awarded many honors including two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the James Renwick Alliance Distinguished Crafts Educator Award, a 2019 Pell Award for Outstanding Leadership in the Arts., a Lifetime Distinction Award from the Furniture Society, and is a named Fellow of the American Craft Council and a Life Trustee of Haystack Mountain School.

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## CREDITS

**Photography:** Erik Gould

**Graphic Design:** Raquel Schott Design



ROSANNE SOMERSON