

The Forecast for Tomorrow

A Roppongi based designer predicts high humidity and a chance of showers across the space-time continuum. And she's sultry, warm and sunny as well.

It was said that absolutely nothing went to waste in old Edo (1603-1868). Today too, Tokyoites are very conscious about separating their trash. Except the day after a storm in Tokyo when the disposal of a battered umbrella can be quite tricky. The ubiquitous transparent vinyl umbrellas made of steel and plastic seen everywhere in Tokyo are con-

Products designed by Shibata are renowned for their textures and simplicity.



venient and cheap, hence usually quite flimsy. And separating an umbrella into burnable and recyclable materials takes a little bit of time. However, there is an umbrella with a different construction and concept. At first glance, it looks similar to the familiar vinyl umbrella. But this one is completely made of reusable plastic. It's the first of its kind, which considers its environmental impact. Safe, with no sharp or pinching parts, and clever—it holds open with the reverse tension of the struts—this umbrella makes rainy days fun. It was designed by Fumie Shibata.

an overwhelming presence without making extreme assertions

Shibata has designed many very successful products. Mobile phones, medical thermometers, sofas, sleep-pods and, umbrellas. In the world of product design there are not many chart-topping women. Shibata's designs are sultry. Soft curves and surfaces, delicate colors, polite finishes, dare we say, feminine. And like Shibata herself, the products have an overwhelming presence without making extreme assertions. As with the phrase "form follows function," Shibata's product morphology is an expression of high functionality, just like her umbrella. We went to meet her.

Tokyo's midtown, Roppongi, with its art museums and skyscrapers, is a city of art and design. Shibata's office, Design Studio S, is in a gap between the tall buildings. Shibata revered Tokyo as a young girl and always wanted to have an office right in the middle of town. That admiration has never changed, and here she is. "Roppongi is a very easy place for design," she says. "The things come to you here, you don't have to go to them." Shibata, a member of the local Roppongi Commerce Association, is a local.

"It was a dream, like wanting to be an actress"

Shibata attended Musashino Art University in the 1980s and learned about product design. "I thought that through design we could make the world a better place," she says. After graduation, she worked at a leading home appliance manufacturer. "Becoming a product designer was not really my goal," she laughs. "It was just a dream, an impossible dream, like wanting to become an actress." But in just a few years she was awarded the coveted Good Design Award. Still frequently winning design awards, she soon became one of Japan's leading product designers. She became



Product designer Fumie Shibata in her studio.

a Good Design Award jury member in 2005, and in 2018 became the Chair of its judging committee.

dewy, like beautiful healthy skin

Shibata made an intriguing comment, "There is essential moisture in nature and in human beings, but few industrial products have this feeling. Since we live our lives with industrial products I want to make them sort of sultry, to feel like I feel. Carefully formed things are easier to touch." Many of Shibata's products touch the body. The atmosphere of every product made by Shibata feels dewy, like beautiful healthy skin. Her designs are all intended to become

part of our lives.

Shibata's aim is to make standard items that go beyond space-time. "There are many general items that may be avant-garde when they are released, but they will not become standard or universal unless they make an impact that changes the era. With a general item's wide acceptance, its avant-garde strength will change to universality." Shibata speaks passionately yet moderately about her ideas, her designs and her products. But at the same time she wants them to be ours. Shibata, who speaks of herself as just another human being searching in her heart for universality, is lovely. Sultry, very like Tokyo—just like her designs.