

The Commissary

a community digest by prickly pear



The Art of Bicycle Building

by Maria Vargas



Bicycle frame building is an art

Bicycle frame building is an art, and Nao Tomii is the sculptor. Handcrafting steel into shapes requires enormous attention to detail and precision to the millimeter. There's beauty in the geometry of the bicycle because it's an extension of the rider. This is the story of how Nao Tomii merged his two loves of sculpting and bicycles into making a living off art and an art of living.

Growing up in Japan, Nao enjoyed making things with his hands at an early age. After high school, while facing the choice of choosing a technical or an art school, he chose art and said, "Art is always more fun." Following a few years at the Japanese art school, Nao moved to Boston as a fine arts sculptor major.

Like any student who's concerned about post-graduation life, Nao was too. "Art can be scary, there are a lot of opportunities for jobs but you have to go looking for them. It was

about 1997 and the internet wasn't big yet so I went with the first job I could find at a sculpting company," he shared. Nao spent the next few years in Boston working on restorations of sculptures and buildings.

The bike is a sculpture

With a fascination with cars, motorcycles, and bikes ever since childhood, Nao got a cheap bike to ride around town and started meeting local cyclists and learning about local frame builders.

That's when Nao made the connection, "It occurred to me, woah! A bike is like a sculpture."

In Japan, bikes are a popular way of transportation. There's infrastructure and people ride to the grocery store and errands. But Nao said he had never considered himself a "cyclist" because biking was just part of everyday life. Rather than driving, many people bike or take trains and buses in Japan.

But while in Boston regular bike commuting was rarer and he slowly began immersing himself in the cycling community and meeting frame builders and friends who taught him the basics of making bikes.

That's when it clicked for Nao. He began tinkering with bicycles and fusing his talents in sculpting to help build bicycles for his friends in his spare time.

In the meantime, Nao continued his work at the sculpture company, crafting molds, restorations, and castings. But at the same time, his bike-building side-gig started growing. His newfound obsession with artistic bike frames inspired him to start making chainrings under the brand 3RRR Products.

Texas is crazy

About 10 years ago, rumors descended upon Boston like a breeze

whispering about a city out West, “Austin, Austin, Austin.” Nao said young creatives were buzzing about it and began moving there.

“A lot of people in Boston say Texas is kind of crazy,” Nao said. So naturally, he went to go check it out for himself. Soon enough, he, his wife, and kids traded Boston for Austin and made it their home.

Nao recounted his transition to leaving his sculpting job and moving his family to a new city. Moves like this are rarely easy especially after leaving a job and taking the step into entrepreneurship while you have a family to support. Nonetheless, Nao was courageous enough to do it.

“My sculpting job had been fun. Every day I was making different

flair. He wanted to forge a strong relationship between his role as an artist and his client’s dream. The bicycle became the way.

Eventually, 3RRR evolved into Tomii Cycles where frame building became his sculptures.

Nao found inspiration in Richard Sachs bicycles logo and design, so he decided to go with the name Tomii bikes, his last name, as the name of his new company.

Tomii Cycles

Handcrafted bikes are an extension of the self. For those souls who find joy spending endless hours in the saddle cruising on two wheels, the bike and the rider become one and the same. If you’re seeking ultimate comfort on the bike, you can look no further than a custom-built frame.

So while mass-market bicycles generally offer multiple sizes, there is almost always a compromise in fit. That’s where custom bike builders like Nao come in.

Nao shared he begins his process with understanding the customer’s intentional use of the bike and then a fit form for body measurements. Then he draws out the bike geometry with the person’s body measurements, also taking into account the person’s current bike measurements.

After that, it’s generally a series of back-and-forth emails talking over the details followed by picking the right tube that is the correct size and thickness (Nao specializes in steel frames) and paint job. If it’s a complete bike build, they talk through the additional components and parts.



stuff and it was a really fun time.

But at the end of the day I was still working for my boss,” Nao said. “My boss was always the one talking with the clients, I never had communication with them.”

After 12 years of a career in sculpting, Nao began realizing he was feeling a little stuck. While he loved his craft, he wanted to interact with his clients and bring projects to life with his artistic



The majority of bicycle manufacturers create standard stock sizes for their bikes. Usually identified with frame sizes such as 49cm, 52cm, 54cm, etc., or by Small, Medium, and Large. But as Nao explains, bikes aren’t one-size-fits-all. You can ride a 52 but if you have longer arms and shorter legs it would feel different than if you’re a rider with shorter arms and longer legs. Aspects like reach, stack, and headtube all play an important role in getting your ideal fit.



The entire process happens in the magical space of Nao’s workshop in the garage of his Austin home. Every nut and bolt is neatly organized and every part has its place. Nao uses the highest quality materials and the majority of the components are made in the USA.

He has large machines for cutting and welding, which he inputs the measurements and cuts the steel down to the millimeter. After the welding, Nao sends the frame off to a painter.

The frame building takes anywhere from two to four weeks or more depending on the number of details. If someone just wants a frame, after the frame is painted, it's ready to go. The customer then would be responsible for the rest of the components. However, if someone wants the entire bike built by Nao, he works with the customer to put together the rest of the bike— adding wheelsets, drivetrain, handlebars, shifters, cables and housing, saddle, crank arm, and much more.

The result is a fully customized and handbuilt sculpture. A functional art piece made for rolling through cities, adventuring through trails, or wherever the rider wants to take it.

Bicycles are the art of living

There's something special about this little two-wheeled machine. Maybe it's the design and functionality or maybe it's the self-sufficiency of it, but most riders can agree that it makes every day better. It's like therapy for the soul and the body.

"You see more stuff when you're riding a bike. You're going slower than a car but faster than walking so you notice buildings and things you've never seen before," Nao said. "We're so accustomed to being in our cars and having the AC or heat. On the bike, we experience everything, even the weather."

Whether the bike is your mode of transportation, sport, or just plain joy, we can all look at our two-wheeled steeds as sculptures, and Tomii Cycles in particular as functionally and aesthetically beautiful

masterpieces made with intentional love and care.

If there's one thing we learned from Nao it's that art and entrepreneurship have one thing in common— the ability to create something where there was nothing before. If that's not exciting, I don't know what is.

In addition to bikes, Nao also makes gorgeous hand-hammered brass bells, as well as water bottles and cycling caps. For drool-worthy photos of his bike masterpieces, you can follow [@tomiicycles](https://www.instagram.com/tomiicycles) on Instagram.



tomi



Limitations Do Not Exist

by Matt Wardle

For most of my life I have never really fit in, I dropped out of school when I was 12 because I suffered from anxiety so much I couldn't handle it. My future plans were not like anybody else's, never had many friends, I have just always been excited to grow up and chase what I wanted in life, when I was young, like most of us, I was programmed by the people around me to think that you have to get good grades then go onto University, graduate, get a 9-5 job and if you don't you would be labelled a failure, but I never really agreed with that lifestyle, I always thought "what's the point? what is the end goal?" but back when I was young I never openly questioned it, I just got on with it and said "okay" and started pursuing a career that I wasn't even very interested in, I was going to join the Royal Navy, I thought "This will make my family proud I know it's not what I want but it will make them proud and that is all that matters".

Fast forward a year and I discover a YouTube channel named 'Yes Theory' their message is to 'seek discomfort' a phrase I am now planning to get tattooed. Yes Theory's philosophy is to stand out, be different, embrace your inner self and chase what you truly want in life and not care what others think, it's your life, nobody else's, just have fun and enjoy life.

A few months on and I have embraced the Yes Theory and Seek Discomfort message, my anxiety is cured and I have finally learnt to not care what people think, which is a superpower in itself. I stopped chasing things I don't want and instead started chasing thing I do want.

Your parents might be disappointed in you, your friends might distance themselves, but that is okay because you are no longer living somebody else's life and instead you are living your own.

One of my true interests is travelling the world, discovering new cultures and embracing all the world has to offer, stepping outside my comfort zone to experience all aspects of life, I have recently got into bike-packing. I realised I wanted to travel the world but didn't want to leave such a huge carbon footprint behind and so I discovered bike-packing and I knew it was perfect for me. I am happy to say I will be taking my first long bike-packing trip in May, exploring Scotland for a month enjoying what the country has to offer and then in September I will be making my way to North America to explore Canada and the USA taking months to explore that fascinating continent. America has always been my favourite place, although I will be visiting for the first time in September I think it has lots of creative opportunities and am looking forward to expressing myself there even more.

Although I am only 17 I feel like I have learned a lot in this world and am looking forward to all the future opportunities and adventures I have to come.

As Yes Theory said "If you're told that you are weird, insane, crazy, stupid, foolish...keep going. You're on the right track. To be normal is far far worse".

Editor's Note

We interviewed and got to know Nao shortly after the snowpocalypse back in February. The three of us had such a lovely conversation as he invited us into his workshop and showed us the ropes of bike building. After a good while of bike-talk, we bonded over plant-based eating as it turns out Nao and his family are living the plant life too! Then over in the yard next to the chicken coop, we spotted an old Renault 4 which was on hiatus under the shade of a big ol' tree because it wouldn't run. Mechanics in the States won't touch Renaults since they're not cars that are sold here. *Lightbulb moment* Good thing our dad is a Renault fanatic, having had multiple in Colombia he used to take them apart and rebuild them for fun. A couple of days later and with a little help from our dad, the Renault was up and running again— off on adventures.

This perhaps is one of our favorite parts of doing these interviews. Connecting with people and connecting them with others. Whether it's learning the art of bicycles from Nao at Tomii Cycles, learning about coffee and the circular economy Bini at Mi Mundo, or learning about the courage to hold on to your wildest ideas like Hollis and Beaux from Happy Horse. We love keeping in touch and developing friendships like these. Whether it's befriending people like Matt from England through a random Instagram comment or meeting people at the farmer's market and reconnecting 6 years later like with Claudia from Upriver Cacao (story coming soon!). Going out of your way a little bit to talk with people and turn strangers into friends really shrinks the world and shows us there are amazing people doing really cool things in our neighborhoods or halfway across the ocean.

A little update from the Prickly Pears: These Pricklies are involved with bringing many projects to life these past few months! Both Luisa and I are currently working with 3-4 companies each in addition to nurturing Prickly Pear and training for a Half Ironman in May. Some cool organizations we're doing work with: Humanity Power, Culture Circle, Kammok, Running for Real Podcast, Running Realized Podcast, Water World Swim via ABC. So, for the next few months we're going to change up the cadence of The Commissary and adjust to a bi-monthly publication. In the meantime we're assessing the return of some Barton Springs Swimrises this summer if COVID numbers continue to decline. Instagram is the best place to stay up to date with these special events. Sending you all good spring vibes and we hope you enjoyed this edition!

With love,
Maria and Luisa Vargas