

# Designing Woman

## Akino Tsuchiya Crafts Cars Aimed at Young Drivers

BY SHOLNN FREEMAN

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

**A**kino Tsuchiya is a rare breed: a woman in the male-dominated field of automotive design. But it's not just her gender that sets her apart.

Ms. Tsuchiya, a Tokyo native, works on the leading edge of a cutting-edge profession—conceiving the cars and trucks that will fit the evolving tastes of Generation Y. Her latest creation made its debut last month at the Dodge pavilion of the Detroit Auto Show, a stylish, brawny, bare-bones roadster concept called the Razor.

The Razor is just one example of the auto industry's newest obsession: very young customers. Some 63 million youths will reach driving age in the next 10 years, and the entire industry is convinced that these customers are the key to its future financial success.

To tailor their designs and products to this market, the car companies will increasingly turn to young, creative up-and-comers for answers. People like Akino Tsuchiya.

### CAREERS

Ms. Tsuchiya, 33 years old, welcomes the challenge. "Young people tend to buy cars that take them from point A to point B," she says. "They don't necessarily enjoy the ride. For us as designers, that's a shame."

### Art for a Living

**W**ith an architect for a father, and a mother who painted flowers on ceramics, Ms. Tsuchiya grew up making things. She crafted her own birthday cards instead of buying them off the shelf. Instead of playing with dolls, she built an amusement park out of paper for her stuffed animals.

At Rikkyo University, one of Japan's top-tier institutions, Ms. Tsuchiya majored in sociology, not knowing exactly what she wanted to do with her life. But she kept up her creative pursuits by taking art and design classes on the side while attending an exchange program at Washington and Lee University in Virginia.

At one point, Ms. Tsuchiya successfully sold a piece of sculpture she created in one of the classes. That's when she started thinking seriously about making a living through art. At age 24, after graduating with the sociology degree, she enrolled at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., and ultimately took up car design for the challenging nature of the work and the job opportunities available to her as a minority.

Ms. Tsuchiya finished design school in 1997, and immediately joined Chrysler's design team in Auburn Hills, Mich., where she is one of eight women on a staff of 80. She says being one of only a handful of female designers in the group was intimidating in the beginning. But she has learned to distinguish herself through her designs, steering clear of what she derides as "chick cars."

"Usually when the car is referred to as a 'chick car,' it means it isn't that great," she says. "When people look at my sketches, they usually think it's a guy's work. That's what I like to hear."

### 'A Woman's Eye'

**S**till, Ms. Tsuchiya isn't afraid to express her female sensibilities in her designs. "I hope something that I have as a female naturally comes out," she says. "If you have something unique as a person, that should come out in design."

For example, she makes sure the seat adjusters in her vehicles won't catch the bag strap of a woman's purse. "That kind of thing, unless you have a woman's eye, you won't even notice," she says. "Those are the details I pay attention to."

In sketching the Razor, Ms. Tsuchiya says she looked back to the elegant yet unpretentious designs of classic European sports cars. She kept the Razor's exterior clean and simple, without any frivolous design elements.

Inside, the Razor takes the simplicity concept even further. It includes no radio, or power seats or door locks. Ms. Tsuchiya and Chrysler are betting that young people will want to customize the cars themselves and mount in bigger, louder stereo systems than the pre-installed ones. That helps keep the car's proposed price tag at low \$14,500, within reach of young buyers.

Even so, Ms. Tsuchiya acknowledges that the sparse design

is a bit of a gamble. "These days it's really hard to identify the trends," she says. "People are getting more expressive. It's good to know if people like this kind of car or if it's too simple."

