Isamu Noguchi in the Pacific Northwest

by Matthew Kangas

The closest continental U.S. city to Japan, Seattle is also the setting for two important public artworks by Isamu Noguchi (1904–88), Black Sun (1968) and Landscape of Time (1975). Another work, Skyviewing Sculpture (1969) is part of the Outdoor Sculpture Collection at Western Washington University, in Bellingham. The Japanese-American artist first visited Seattle in 1917 at the age of 13, en route to a private boarding school in Indiana, and later returned in 1968, 1969, and 1975 to oversee the three commissioned works in the region.

Although Noguchi’s Modernist strategies as a sculptor have been widely discussed (his apprenticeship with Brancusi, for example), it is important to stress his Japanese side, partly in light of his impact on Japanese artists but also considering his influence on artists in the Pacific Northwest. It is fascinating to note how myopic and exclusively Western early criticism of Noguchi was. Clement Greenberg, the chief culprit, appears in hindsight laughably obtuse: “The stone Noguchi favors for his ambitious efforts strikes me, also, as being inappropriate to his ideas, most of which seem to demand metal or wood.”

Forty-six years later, the Japanese art critic Yoshiaki Imui lavishly praised Noguchi’s use of stone as a paramount virtue. Noguchi’s works were not works of human art called sculpture, but stone itself revealing the existence of nature: stone as condensed essence of nature. Thus, just as critics of Noguchi have held widely divergent opinions, as far afield as Osaka and New York, so Noguchi’s works in the Pacific Northwest have also elicited strong negative and positive opinions. Looking back, it appears that both extremes may have had some limited justification.

Not long before the young boy disembarked at the Port of Seattle, his father, Yonejiro Noguchi, had spent time in the city, becoming part of a small circle of artists, poets, and intellectuals that included photographer Imogen Cunningham and her husband, Roi Partridge. Noguchi’s father was an art critic and poet who had lectured at Oxford, among other universities. He offered his later-reconciled illegitimate son a model for the artist-writer, as the younger Noguchi’s ample texts proved. A more oblique link to Seattle is choreographer Martha Graham, who would also remind Noguchi in later years of the art-friendly city.

Graham taught at the Cornish Institute of Allied Arts in the 1930s, along with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, after she met Noguchi in New York in 1929 (his first sets for her were done in 1944).

Black Sun and Landscape of Time are both associated with architect Fred Bassetti. Bassetti attempted to incorporate his own sculpture in lieu of Landscape and shared a plaza with Noguchi in Bellingham, where his own tipped-cube wooden sculpture is blantly derivative of Noguchi’s Red Cube (1968), located in front of the Marine Midland Bank in lower Manhattan. Landscape of Time, in front of the Henry M. Jackson Federal Office Building in downtown Seattle, was a compromise solution to Bassetti’s attempts to use his own work on the site. After the local press panned a public outcry led by artists, the General Services Administration rejected the architect’s proposal, and a panel consisting of museum directors from San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the University of Washington subsequently selected Noguchi.

Black Sun (which is based on an earlier, smaller Black Sun, 1960–67) had its Bassetti-designed site and...
A recent exhibition offered viewers a cross-section of Noguchi’s work and a historical context for public works in Seattle.

space, by the towering presence of the building, by the noise of the city traffic. It is like a child abandoned by a parent. There is not enough of anything in it. Eerily describing the artist’s own fate as a son abandoned by his father, Campbell was, unlike Hinterberger, at least respectful of Noguchi as an artist. Noguchi, for his part, defended the piece, explaining why, even though photographs of the work in Japan show it with its own rectangular grass plinth, he had opted for setting it directly on Bassetti’s red brick paving stones: “People will be able to walk between [the stones] and there will be no hindrance in the circulation. Viewed from the street, the plaza is like a podium and another one on top would be a redundancy.”

Harriet Senie, writing in Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy, disagreed: “Unfortunately, Landscape of Time lives up to neither its role nor the artist’s intentions. It is not well integrated with the rest of the open space around the building, with seating too far away to allow for a prolonged view. It never establishes a space of its own, its color only serving to make it less distinguishable from the architecture and ground surfaces.” Perhaps both Noguchi and Bassetti must share the blame, although Bassetti, now 83, has said: “Senie is not quite right. I do think the basic podium idea was wrong. The stones themselves are fine but they would have been better without the direct carving. And it’s true the seats are far away. To put them closer would’ve been too self-conscious. I was disappointed Noguchi didn’t do something more geometric, like Skyviewing Sculpture.”

All of these issues were raised again in September, 1999, when “Isamu Noguchi: Paper & Stone,” the first West Coast solo exhibition of Noguchi since 1999, opened at Bryan Ohno Gallery in Seattle, accompanied by a book-length essay by original Noguchi biographer Sam Hunter. Whereas Hunter’s earlier book was definitive and thorough as far as it went (to 1979), his latest essay focuses on Noguchi’s “unique vision” of six sculptures in stone, stainless steel, and galvanized steel, along with a display of Akari lamps. Noted architect George Suyama, assisted by Jay Deguchi, designed the entire installation.

Mitosis (1962), Little Id (1970), Knife in the Rock (1970), Pylon (1981), Cloud Mountain (1982), and
Noguchi’s ties to the Pacific Northwest began with his father, but they persist in his enduring impact on three generations of artists.

Target (1984) offered viewers a highly selective cross-section of the artist’s works across time, as well as a historical context for Black Sun and Landscape of Time. A collaborative effort between the gallery, the Seattle Asian Art Museum, and the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, the exhibition attracted over 6,000 visitors.

Hunter’s essay commented on Suyama’s “ingenious installation” of the Akan lamps but also went into more detail about how the other works make sense in Seattle since “one encounters his characteristic balance of opposing cultural forces, East and West.” Both Black Sun and Target seem “organic and fabricated,” while Knife in the Rock shares a comparable material, color, and “accidental and crafted” quality.

Pylon and Cloud Mountain are editioned galvanized steel works done with Gemini G.E.L. They appear to Hunter more “technological [and] Constructivist.” Mitosis may represent “a single, infinitesimally tiny primitive being in the process of dividing into two parts,” but Hunter also suggests human heads or ceramic vessels as interpretations, as well as a highly telling suggestion of “parent and child playfully nuzzling one another.” A further, obliquely psychological analysis captures the primal core of Noguchi’s vision, “a child’s dream and hopes remained, pure and always fresh.”

Twelve years after his death, Noguchi’s influence is still strong in Japan and the Pacific Northwest, where a few artists who knew or met him continue to flourish. Gerard Tsutakawa’s


father, George (who died in 1997), spent considerable amounts of time with the artist in Japan and in Seattle, where he was introduced by architect Ibsen Neken who oversaw the siting of Skyviewing Sculpture. Gerard again traveled last year to Noguchi’s Mure, Shikoku Island, studio and visited the artist’s gravesite. Like Noguchi, George Tsutakawa was divided between Asian and Western aesthetic models, in the latter case, due to studies at the University of Washington in 1936 and 1952 with Constructivist master Alexander Archipenko.

Kasatuka Uchida returned to Japan after studies at the University of Oregon but continues to exhibit his carved marble, basalt, and granite sculptures in Seattle. Michihiro Kosuge, now chair of the art department at Portland State University in Oregon, has created many garden-like public artworks using found and altered basalt stones. He says that he remembers spending time with the older artist while he was a graduate student at San Francisco Art Institute in 1969. Kosuge agrees that Landscape of Time is a failure: “The site is not perfect; it should have been like an island with one single pine tree and five stones.” Kosuge’s art is a stripped-down, even more Minimalist, version of Noguchi’s work, employing multiple elements, reimagining color to the constant gray of the basalt.

Finally, two younger artists, Yuki Nakamura and Kazuhito Kobayashi, demonstrate extensions of Noguchi’s “unique vision” into, respectively, low-lying, floor-based ceramic installations and brightly colored, highly simplified organic forms made of hand-dyed wool felt.

Noguchi’s ties to the Pacific Northwest began with his father and continued with his own commissions, but they persist in exerting an influence through exhibitions, critical response, and his enduring impact on three generations of artists addressing the cultural interface between Japan and America.

Matthew Kangas, a frequent contributor to Sculpture, also writes for the Seattle Times, Art in America, and Glass. His latest book is Roji Koie (University of Washington Press).

Notes
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.