
The Masques of Noguchi

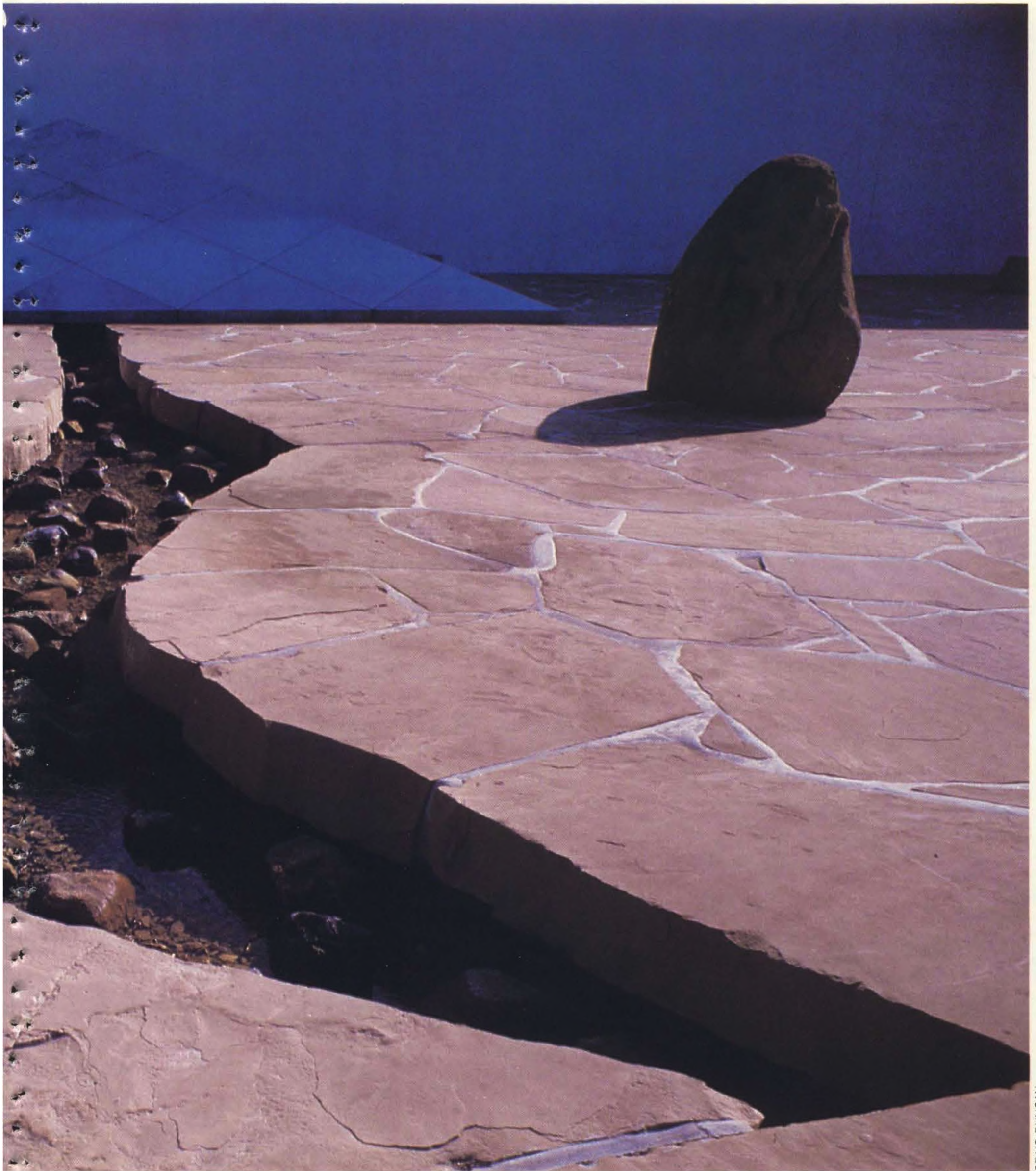


“I like to think of gardens as sculpturing of space... A man may enter such a space; it is in scale with him; it is real.”

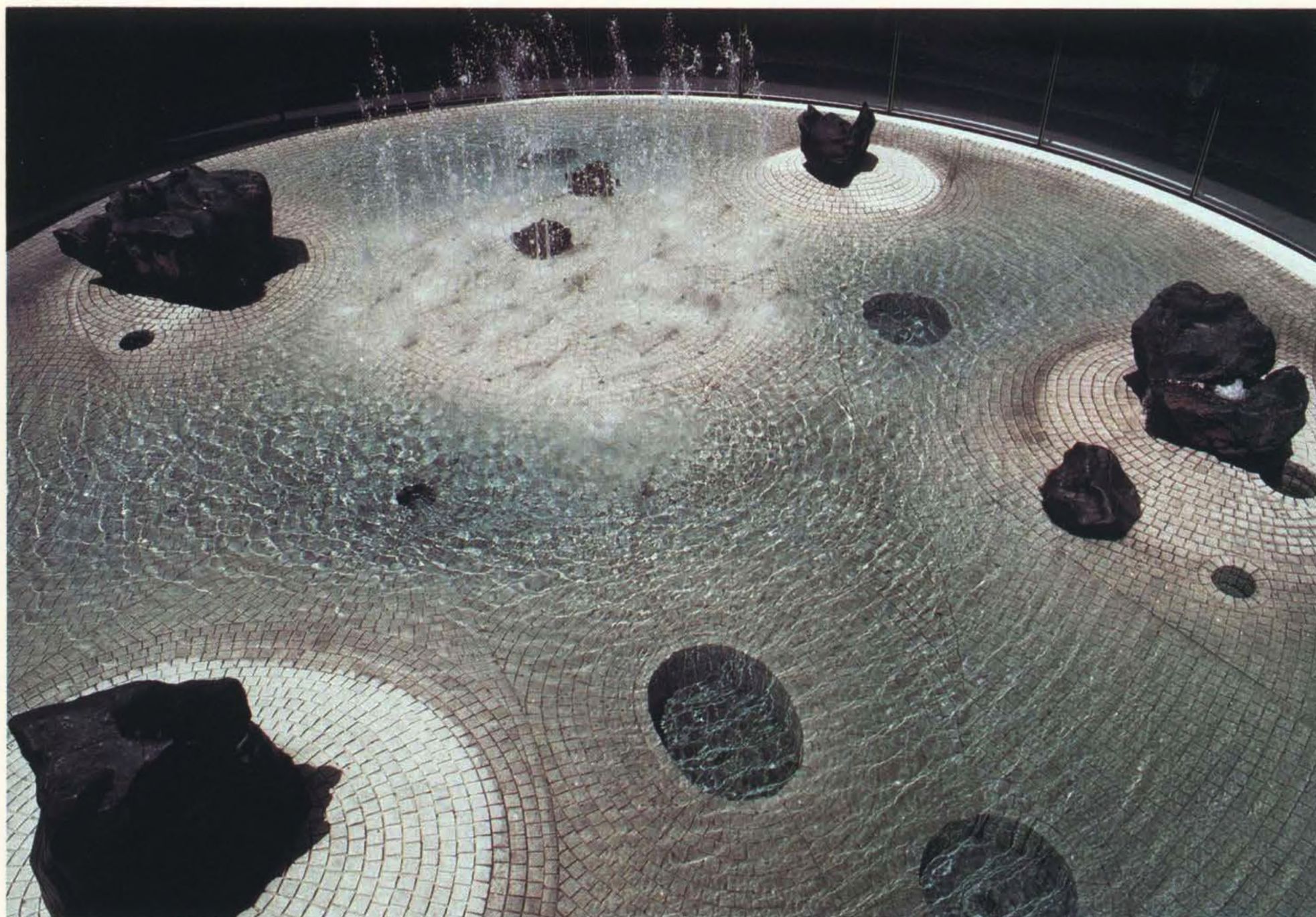
By Jory Johnson

California Scenario, 1983, Costa Mesa, California.





CRAIG DUNCAN



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IN BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, OUR response to the imbroglio of modern civilization too often is an arrangement of formal, self-referential landscape features: pleasant places in which to pass an idle hour. Isamu Noguchi has responded by creating forms of power and bracing clarity that challenge and enrich us.

Noguchi's art is paradoxical. His landscapes are richly symbolic, yet direct and accessible. They are charged with energy and drama, but are static by comparison with conventional gardens. Because he delights in eluding easy definitions, his landscapes sometimes are criticized as being beautiful in detail but garbled and illegible as a whole. On the contrary, his landscapes speak to modern man precisely because Noguchi rejects the comfortable solution.

Having achieved great acclaim for his sculpture and stage sets, Noguchi came to gardens and environmental works through contemplating the nature of sculpture. In 1949, at age 45, he traveled through Greece, India, Bali and Japan. He became convinced that sculpture need not be confined to small objects: As proven by the Japanese, the entire garden could be a single sculpture.*

It was not easy for Noguchi to find opportunities to explore the field of landscape design. His first experience, in 1952, was a small garden for the *Reader's Digest* building in Tokyo, Japan. It was later demolished, but Noguchi learned a great

*Noguchi's father was a Japanese poet; his mother, an American writer and teacher. Born in Japan, Noguchi came to America at age 14.

Black river stone from Japan is playfully elevated in a sunken plaza in the midst of Manhattan. Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza, 1964, New York City.

deal from working with Japanese gardeners on the project. A series of unrealized projects followed; it wasn't until 1956, at age 52, that Noguchi had a large-scale project built: the courtyard gardens and terrace for the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company (in collaboration with architect Gordon Bunshaft). While these gardens do not strive for the dramatic tension of his earlier projects (three large pieces of sculpture were placed well away from the building), they demonstrate an extremely sophisticated command of proportion, scale and detail.

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During the next two decades, commissions came more easily. By choice, he concentrated on a few select projects, most recently a contained plaza at Costa Mesa, California (1983).

The Costa Mesa plaza, called “California Scenario,” echoes Noguchi’s gardens of the past twenty years. The triangular water source is reminiscent of a courtyard proposal for M.I.T. that was never built. The pyramid recalls the Beinecke Library as well as the IBM garden; rough stones juxtaposed with polished surfaces hark back to the UNESCO garden. How easy it would have been for him to have replicated his work, but Noguchi never had the slightest interest in repeating himself.

There is no doubt a distrust on my part for style and for the success that accrues from it. There is another factor...the urge to break out.¹

Noguchi is self-assertive, zealously protective of his art, and has a healthy intolerance for bureaucratic details. But, in a typically paradoxical attitude, he champions collaboration with architects and urges artists to design with the architect rather than to sell pieces of art to be dropped in front of the building.

Noguchi’s works are highly individualistic and respond to the spirit of the architecture as well as scale and formal issues. Both the Chase Manhattan and the Beinecke are sunken, sealed gardens of a similar size. However, the pure white marble forms of Beinecke hold the same mysterious knowledge as that great temple of rare books, while the swirling, playful levitation of black river stone at the Chase Manhattan, so refreshing in the hustle and confusion of Broadway and Wall Street, would be quite out of place in front of a library.

Between this collaborative ideal and the reality falls a long shadow of frustration and distrust. Noguchi has said on other occasions that architects are: egotistical, wanting to hog the whole thing...I have treated it as a

test of my competence to contribute something in spite of so-called collaboration, which is so one sided.²

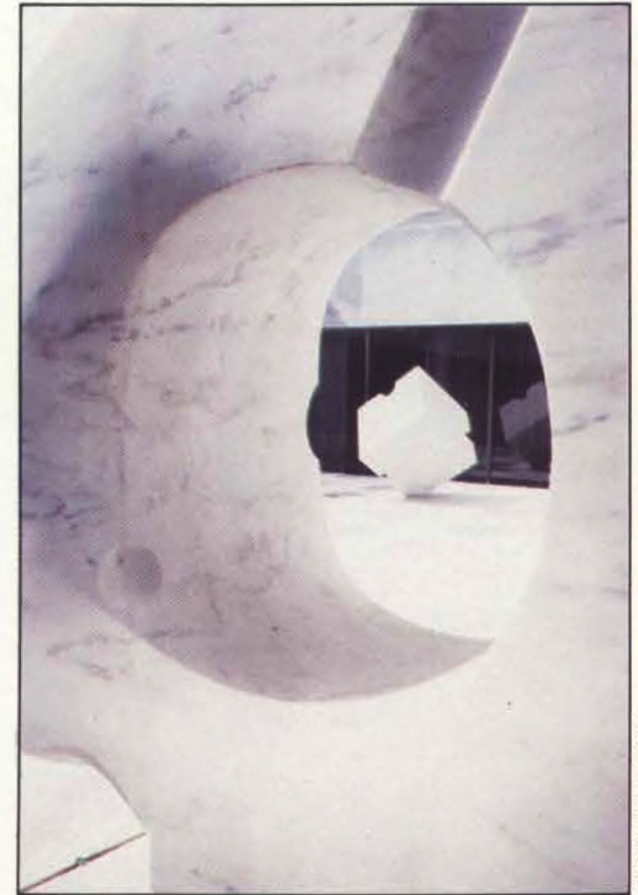
Noguchi has collaborated only with artists who are as strong and uncompromising as he. Martha Graham, Gordon Bunshaft and Louis Kahn all wanted much more than just a piece of decorative art and they collaborated with Noguchi to produce some of his best work.

Without Martha Graham, Noguchi might never have explored the randomness and psychological symmetry of Japanese designs. Graham’s desire for a dance of contraction and release, a study in tension and ritual, merged with Noguchi’s own concerns in sculpture. Graham would come to Noguchi with an emotion drawn from a literary or mythic text and, in Noguchi’s own words, he would “give her the setting which would encompass the emotional topic,”³ using forms to activate the stage and create an illusion of deep, timeless space.

Just as Noguchi believed dance sets were pieces of sculpture, so too in the garden did he seek a larger and more public arena for his art.

I like to think of gardens as sculpturing of space: a beginning and a groping to another level of sculptural experience and use. A total sculptural space experience beyond individual sculptures. A man may enter such a space: it is in scale with him; it is real. An empty space has no visual dimension of significance. Scale and meaning enter when some thoughtful object or line is introduced. This is why sculptures, or rather sculptural objects, create space. Their function is illusionist. The size and shape of each element is entirely relative to all the others and the given space. What may be incomplete as sculptural entities are of significance to the whole.

Such sculpture is eliminative, it is neither this nor that but a thing in space that affects our consciousness—a mode in the void—without content related to or derived from



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The element of chance is embodied in a precariously balanced marble cube, one of three pieces held in tension on a marble base. For Noguchi, this garden is nothingness and the source of life. Beinecke Library, 1964, Yale University.

anything exterior to its purpose—in effect subliminal. These sculptures form what I call a garden.⁴

Noguchi’s passion for hands-on work extends into unlikely realms. While holding a deep respect for traditional materials and crafts, he is fascinated with high technology. He has sliced stones with precision drilling equipment and has designed many complicated fountains, including a dozen huge technological marvels for EXPO 70, at Osaka, Japan. After designing the towering 30-foot-high fountain for the Hart Plaza in Detroit, Noguchi was told by the fountain consultant, Richard Chaix, that the water jets wouldn’t work. Noguchi returned a few months later to the startled Chaix with a 120-pound prototype (which Noguchi later patented) that not only solved the problems of water flow, but permitted additional lighting effects.

“Sculptures move only when we move.”



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Unease permeates Noguchi's landscapes. This garden tells of the future, our solitude and the fears of age. The Future, IBM Courtyard, 1964, Armonk, New York.

The Dodge Fountain at the Hart Plaza provides an incredible wonder and glory for Detroit, but the remainder of the Plaza falls far below the level of design detail and craftsmanship that distinguishes his other projects. Although the Dodges provided generously for the fountain, the remainder of the project has suffered from budget cuts, municipal neglect and intensive use. But Noguchi is passionately committed to integrating his art into realms of public activity (Noguchi never has designed a private garden) and the Hart Plaza has accommodated immense crowds under all conditions. The sight of small children reaching beseechingly towards the gigantic fountain affirms Noguchi's buoyant assertion that:

The fountain conveys a sense of the imminence of change. It gives people hope. It lets them know that the future isn't all selfishness and desecration. I think its meaning will be perceived by people without

(their) really knowing.⁵

The Dodge Fountain is an expression of Noguchi's playfulness. How many small children have squealed with delight when suddenly drenched by the capricious fountain? Noguchi's mischievous spirit also is found in California Scenario, where a lush grass mound is topped by a coffin-like granite slab. It is entitled "A Monument to Development."

While Noguchi's explorations of hard materials has been unlimited in scope and imagination, he has shown little interest in creative uses of plant material. Meant to symbolize our Edenic past, the IBM courtyard displays a clipped bluegrass lawn, junipers and white pines, suggesting that Eden exists not in the distant past, but in nearby Scarsdale. California Scenario is perhaps the first time Noguchi has used plants in such a way that the garden will be transformed over time, thus animating the element of chance embodied in the precarious marble cube at the Beinecke Library. The redwood grove at California Scenario is now a forest miniaturization, but the redwoods will be enormous in fifty years. It is difficult to predict how that will affect the emblematic aspect

of the mound or its spatial relationship with the plaza. Still, one wishes that Noguchi would explore the symbolic and structural potential of living forms and create landscapes of meaningful incompleteness, not places that face only maintenance or decay.

Noguchi has always been troubled by the term "sculpture garden." In Japanese gardens, the rocks, while they may have been heavily worked, appear to be *objets trouvés* and individual elements are never dominant. Although many objects in Noguchi's gardens would be treasured by art museums, it is clear that they would have little integrity or strength if isolated in a gallery. In the garden, they draw tension and energy from the relationship to the base plane and other garden elements. This is most apparent at the Beinecke Library, where the scored marble base holds three pieces in dynamic tension.

But as always in Noguchi's art, there is an antithesis. The individual pieces may not dominate, but they are extremely eloquent monologues. Like Martha Graham, Noguchi is unabashedly mythopoetic in describing his work. The circular disc at the Beinecke Library is:

the coiled magnet, the circle of ever-accelerating force. As energy, it is the source of all life and the life of everyman... Looked at in other ways, the circle is zero or the zero of nothingness from which we come, to which we return. The hole is the abyss, the mirror, the question mark. Or it may be the trumpet which calls youth to its challenge—from which a note has sounded.⁶

Given Noguchi's background and the theatrical bravura of his sculptures, one might expect to find a dramatic performance in his gardens: each twist and turn another *coup de theatre*. On the contrary, Noguchi's gardens disappoint those who prize the comfort of garden vistas and paths. Noguchi asserts that there is a narrative sequence in his gardens: The totality is transformed, depending upon one's vantage point, so that the



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garden is visible only to the mobile participant. "Sculptures move only when we move."⁷ In an age of sensory overload and simultaneous perception, we can respond to polydirectional focus as well as to traditional garden cadences.

While Noguchi's gardens are very complex in plan, the individual elements usually are geometric shapes or almost primal stone, making a direct visual discourse with each element very simple. It is not simple in the way that an Islamic garden will frame a single water jet because contrasting pieces intrude on one's field of vision. In fact, this discordant dialogue of forms loaded with imagery and symbolism is the very essence of Noguchi's landscape art.

Noguchi transforms archetypes—the triangle, the cube, the pyramid, the

column—into symbols for our own time. At Hart Plaza, a 120-foot-high pylon is twisted into the sky as if man's once-simple prayer to the gods has become wrenched with self-doubt or bent by man's drive to control nature and frustration with his failure. At IBM, Noguchi chiseled scientific hieroglyphics on the concrete forms: modern man trying to unlock the dark secrets of the ages. At the Beinecke Library, the pyramid and the tilted cube are not quite geometrically perfect. Is perfect form beyond the grasp of man?

Nowhere is Noguchi's ability to fashion multiple layers of meaning and experience more manifest than with the Dodge Fountain. From a distance, the form of the fountain recalls the traditional Japanese Shinto gate or *torii*, which marks ceremonial

Noguchi chose to represent the Edenic past at the other end of the IBM Courtyard, in opposition to the future. But its meaning lies in the present, personal experience of the sculptured space.

entries and here welcomes us to the plaza and the Detroit River. As we approach the powerful circle raised to the sky on gleaming aluminum supports, it recalls a very modern archetype: the flying saucer from outer space. Indeed, when the powerful jets are directed downwards, it may be described as being in the "take-off" mode. Locally, the fountain evokes the powerful engines that identify Detroit. If one happens upon the fountain when only the lower granite circle is flowing, there is a delicious tension and play in waiting for the water to come bursting forth from the

Noguchi's gardens are dramatic compositions of ancient myths and modern dreams.

sky. Thus we have in one grand gesture the ceremony and welcome of the *torii*, the mechanical marvel and engineering genius of Detroit, the disturbing mystery of the universe, and finally, terrific entertainment on a hot summer day.

Noguchi first began building gardens at the dawn of the Atomic Age. He once said he wanted to create "beautiful and disturbing gardens to awaken us to a new awareness of our solitude."⁸ Unease permeates his landscapes. At California Scenario, the water gushes from a trough in a freestanding triangle, runs through the courtyard and disappears under a pyramidal form, just as our lives on Earth ultimately return to that dark hole. As the water courses through the courtyard (the movement is created not by grade changes, but by small jets embedded in the edge of the stream) the thickness of the flagstone decreases: youth eroding into

old age. The stream can disturb us physically as well, since there is no protective edge to prevent us from being startled by a rude splash.

Noguchi's gardens are not verdant retreats, but contemporary masques—dramatic compositions of ancient myths and modern dreams. If we go to the garden to re-experience the Garden of Eden, it is important to be reminded that there was violence in that garden; that it is idyllic only in retrospect.

Walking through Noguchi's landscapes, I am reminded of a theatrical dictum that a bad playwright writes as if he were painting a picture for the audience, but a gifted playwright knows that he must leave some of the canvas blank because a play is successful only if it is completed by the audience. Noguchi's landscapes are stage sets where we enter as spectators to become the most important actors in a carefully crafted drama. It

is up to us, not Noguchi, to measure our lives. But in a final paradox, it is Noguchi's measured intervention in the landscape that records our lives and our age. □

NOTES

1. Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968): 163.
2. Isamu Noguchi, "The Sculptor and the Architect," in *Art in America* (June 1964): 84.
3. Martin Friedman, *Noguchi's Imaginary Landscapes* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1978): 41.
4. Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 216.
5. Friedman, op. cit., p. 41.
6. Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 203.
7. Conversation with Noguchi at his studio in Long Island City, New York, on April 27, 1983.
8. Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World*, p. 203.

MAJOR BUILT LANDSCAPE PROJECTS

"Reader's Digest Garden," 1951, Tokyo, Japan. Now destroyed. Architect: Antonin Raymond.

"Gardens for Connecticut General Life Insurance Company," 1956-57, Bloomfield Hills, Connecticut. Three pieces of granite sculpture—16' high, 12' high, 6' high—six courtyard gardens 75' x 40'.

"UNESCO Garden," Patio des Delegates and Jardin Japonais, 1956-58. A raised terrace and a sunken garden, total area 1.4 acres. Architect: Marcel Breuer.

"Garden for the Beinecke Rare Book Library," 1960-64, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. White marble, 45' x 120'. Architect: Gordon Bunshaft.

"Billy Rose Sculpture Garden," 1960-65, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel.

"Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza Garden," 1961-64, New York City, Black River Stone and Granite Paving. Architect: Gordon Bunshaft.

"IBM gardens," Armonk, New York, 1964. Architect: Gordon Bunshaft.

"Red Cube," 140 Broadway, New York City. Architect: Gordon Bunshaft.

"Philip A. Hart Plaza," Detroit, Michigan, 1972-79. Architect: Shoji Sadao.

"Playscapes," Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia, 1975-76.

"Landscape of Time," Seattle, Washington, Federal Office Building, five large granite pieces on a plaza, 1976.

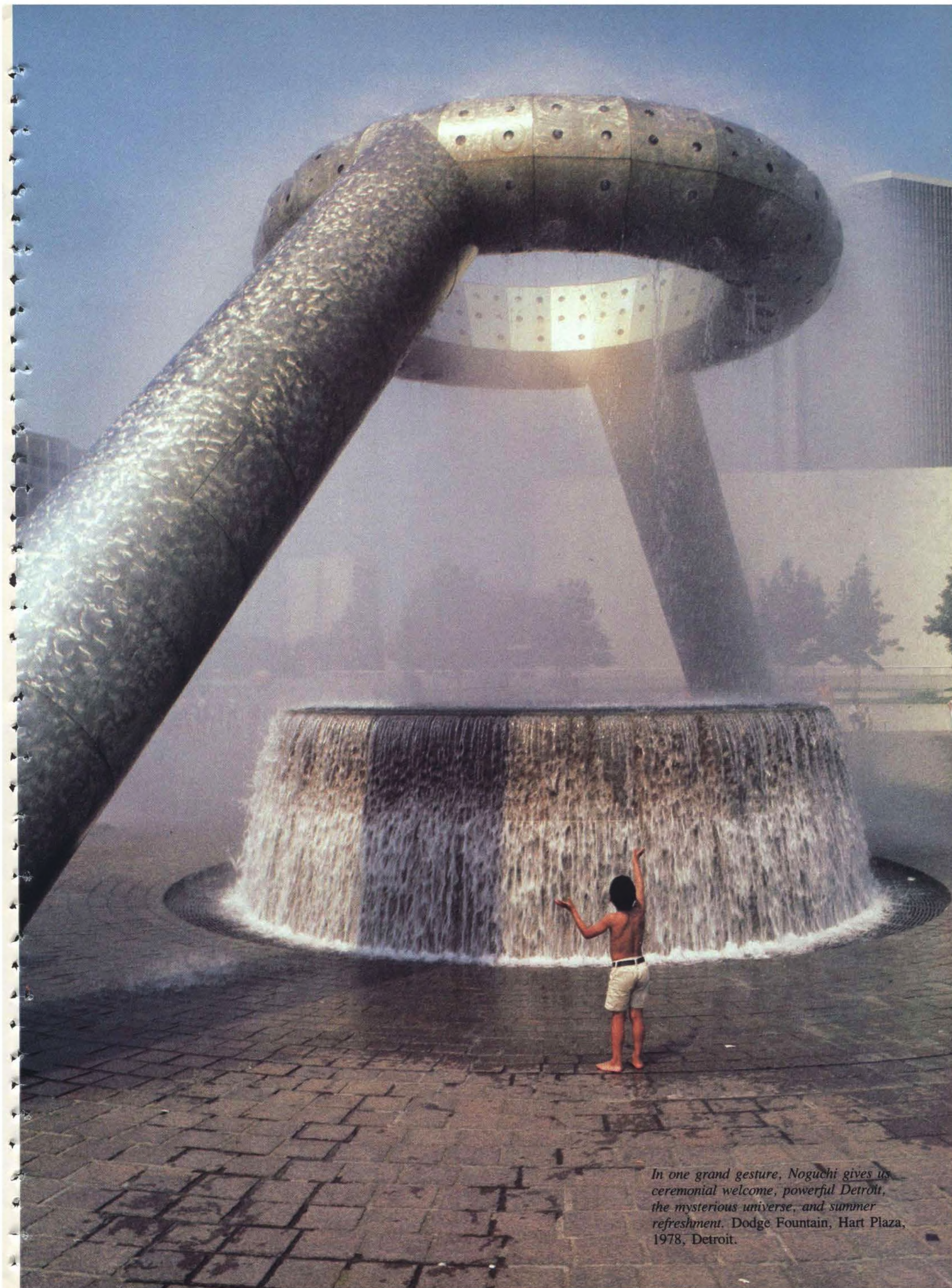
"Heaven," Sogetsu School of Flower Arrangement, 1977-78, Tokyo, Japan, Granite. Architect: Sofu Teshigahara.

"Playground for Kodomo No Kuni," Tokyo, Japan, 1965.

"California Scenario," Costa Mesa, California, 1979-1982. Owner: C. J. Segerstrom and Sons.

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- Benjamin Forgey, "In the Elegant World of Space and Function," in *Smithsonian* (April 1978): 46-55.
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- John Gordon, *Isamu Noguchi* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968).
- Nancy Grove, "The Visible and Invisible Noguchi," in *Artforum* (March 17, 1980): 56-60.
- Sam Hunter, *Isamu Noguchi* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1980).
- Isamu Noguchi, "The Sculptor and the Architect," in *Art in America* (June 1964): 84-89.
- Isamu Noguchi, *The Sculpture of Space* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980).
- Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York, Harper and Row, 1968).



In one grand gesture, Noguchi gives us ceremonial welcome, powerful Detroit, the mysterious universe, and summer refreshment. Dodge Fountain, Hart Plaza, 1978, Detroit.