

Nagasawa Hidetoshi: A Traveller of Materials

By Iseki Masaaki

“Sculpting is not carving out nature-like objects. It is the creation of another nature.” These words reflect Nagasawa Hidetoshi’s view of the aesthetic profession he has chosen for his life. This basic philosophy is also held by other modern sculptors including Rodin and Rosso.

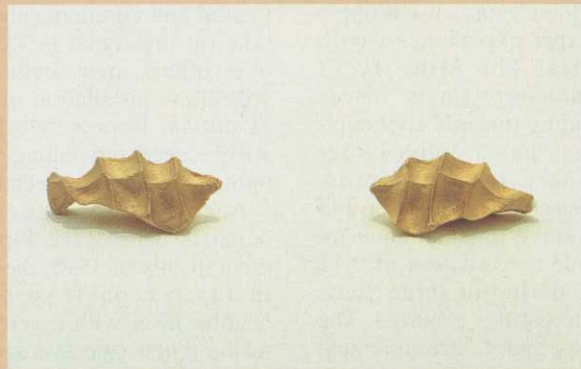
However, Nagasawa has gone a step further, proving himself to be a modernist sculptor (as opposed to a post-modernist) of the first rank as he advocates: “When a sculpture leaves the hands of its creator, it must be completely devoid of the idea or concept the sculptor originally envisioned. A piece of sculpture is what is left after the sculptor’s idea or concept has taken form.”

A casual look at his work tells us of the variety that makes up Nagasawa’s world. Material, form and content together offer an amazing diversity and depth. The diversity is so remarkable that some would naturally wonder where the artist’s philosophical consistency lies. To be sure, each work has a perfect balance between the idea which Nagasawa holds and the material he employs. Each represents what he advocates—life or freedom of mind. But this is not enough to explain the diversity in his work.

A key to this diversity lies in the life he led as a young man. In 1966, Nagasawa left Japan at age 26. He reached Europe as he traveled the Asian Highway on bicycle. After living in Paris, he settled in Milan where he has spent the past 30 years. There is little doubt that his experiences and journeys nurtured his art. His early works, including the masterfully executed *Ruota*, *Piroga*, *La porta*, and *Viaggio* eloquently evoke a life in motion. This image of sojourning often became a motif in his later works. Among these works, variations of *Piroga* took a more conclusive form in a 1980/81 sculpture entitled *Barca*. *Barca* is a small stone vessel in which a single tree stands



“Colonna,” 1972; photo by Anzai Shigeo; Art Tower Mito.



“Oro di Ofir,” 1971/93; photo by Anzai Shigeo; Art Tower Mito.

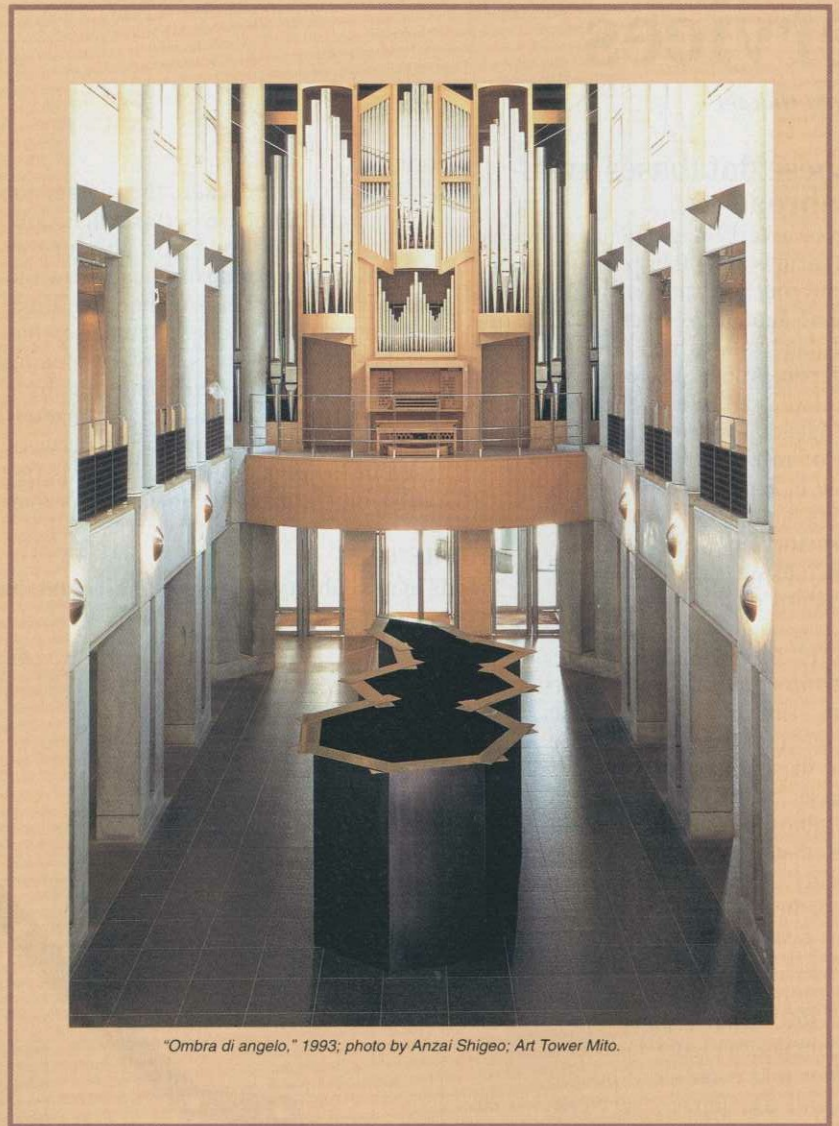
erect. It represents the earth itself, with an unvarying landform and the fate of the earth forlorn in a small drifting boat in a vast sea. Variations of *Barca* appear in many abstract forms, which have the same origins as based on Nagasawa's "mind to journey."

Colonna earned Nagasawa a reputation as a world-class sculptor at the Venezia Biennale in 1972. What captivates viewers is the splendid harmony in the mass of twisted fragments which incorporate contradicting rhetorical possibilities of continuation and discontinuation. *Colonna* is not merely a reflection of the course of Nagasawa's mind. After the artist's touch has gone, the conceptual form alone remains.

In the early 1970's Nagasawa's attention shifted from the relationship between objects to the association between man and object. It was in those days that he set his course toward a more conceptual art, the major current of that time. *Oro di Ofir*, executed in 1971, is a small gold sculpture formed out of wax squeezed in his palm. In this work, Nagasawa expressed an image of an embrace between a human body and the universe. Other works also indicate that Nagasawa had a penchant for Arte Povera in Italy, a school which embodies concepts similar to his own. He was especially influenced by the neo-Dadaistic experimental methods advocated by Piero Manzoni, who died young. Another influential factor was Luciano Fabro's strong sensitivity to the environment. Through a close association with Fabro, Nagasawa came to be regarded as one of the representative sculptors of Arte Povera.

However, Nagasawa did not remain within the constraints of Arte Povera. He used all conceivable materials, including stone, wood, paper, cloth and iron to best express his concepts. He also participated in various performances and events.

Pozzo, a 1981 sculpture, comprises waves carved into a well lid. These waves are a metaphysical expression of



"Ombra di angelo," 1993; photo by Anzai Shigeo; Art Tower Mito.

water observed from the sky. *Albero*, created in 1983, is based on the legend of a heavenly woman who comes down to earth to bathe. *Luogo dei fiori* in 1985 and *Ombra di angelo* in 1986 sought to transcend the order of space as observed from the heavens. In the 1990's, his works seek a cosmic balance with geometry and physics.

Nagasawa's creations are unrivaled in their diversity of experimentation and confident existence. For these reasons, we dare not classify Nagasawa as a mere avant-garde creator of modern art.

He is positioned as an international artist who cannot be bound by the national borders of Japan or Italy. This international acclaim finds its origin on his shift from "a mind to journey" to "a journey of the mind."

When that journey is complete, the antithesis will rule that the style is gone, but the philosophy remains. ■

Iseki Masaaki, an art critic mainly in the field of history of Japanese and Western modern art, is a professor at Meisei University in Tokyo.