

Message from Iron: Wakabayashi Isamu

By Iseki Masaaki

To simply call the artist Wakabayashi Isamu a "sculptor" is problematic. It is not just that the relationships among object, nature and the artist that emerge from his works, crafted in clusters and combinations of whatever material he uses, overstep the conceptual bounds of the conventional sculptor. Nor is it simply the rich diversity of form he imparts to his work. The artist's profundity of thought approaches what must be called a mythology of modern society.

In the so-called vanguard of post-World War II modern Japanese sculpture, the *mono-ha* artists (materialists) who symbolized the 1970s gave priority to the concept of making things from materials that were out of the realm of traditional art material. In contrast, Wakabayashi presents art that emphasizes the material it is made of, the material itself becoming the art. That is, if the works of the materialists reject art as it was traditionally formed but are naturally considered art by the criteria of "humanity and substance," then Wakabayashi's works are based on the criteria of "self and substance," presenting materials as art itself. At the time, Wakabayashi's art stood alone.

Most call him an iron sculptor. Wakabayashi, however, thinks of iron as not only a material for sculpture, but as a mode of expression of self-existence, above all of the internal self through its relationship with nature. The message is not *to* the iron, but *from* it, drawing us into a deep contemplation of the internal self.

"The colors of earthly iron in most of its states is consistent with the colors that we see when we look at our surroundings or the details of those surroundings . . ." This comment, one of Wakabayashi's many, illustrates his world view that connects iron to its surroundings and the natural environment.

When he gets his hands on the essentially inorganic material of iron,

Wakabayashi's intent is to transform it into something organic. Why must he use iron to create a relationship between nature and the existence of self? Why can't it be wood or paper or clay? In bringing opposites close together, a sense of distance and self-possession are fundamental. In between any two things is a void. If natural surroundings are a thing, we can see an attempt to understand those surroundings as an accumulation of the internal depths of self and surroundings over a limited period of time. At that point the material of iron must come closer to nature, but without distance the message from the iron will be wasted.

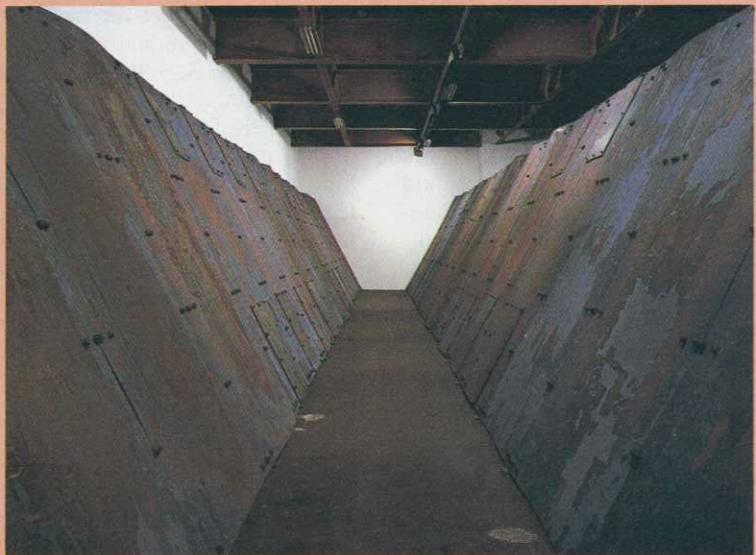
Wakabayashi also discovered another quality of iron—rust—and used it on his iron forms to bring them closer to nature, more organic, thus allowing for a stronger ownership over one's dialogue with nature.

When he says ". . . iron is by my side, and is something that can be traced back in time, while other materials simply move forward," he means that iron is to him both the confirmation of a

beginning and an end that really has no end. It is a confirmation of time eternal.

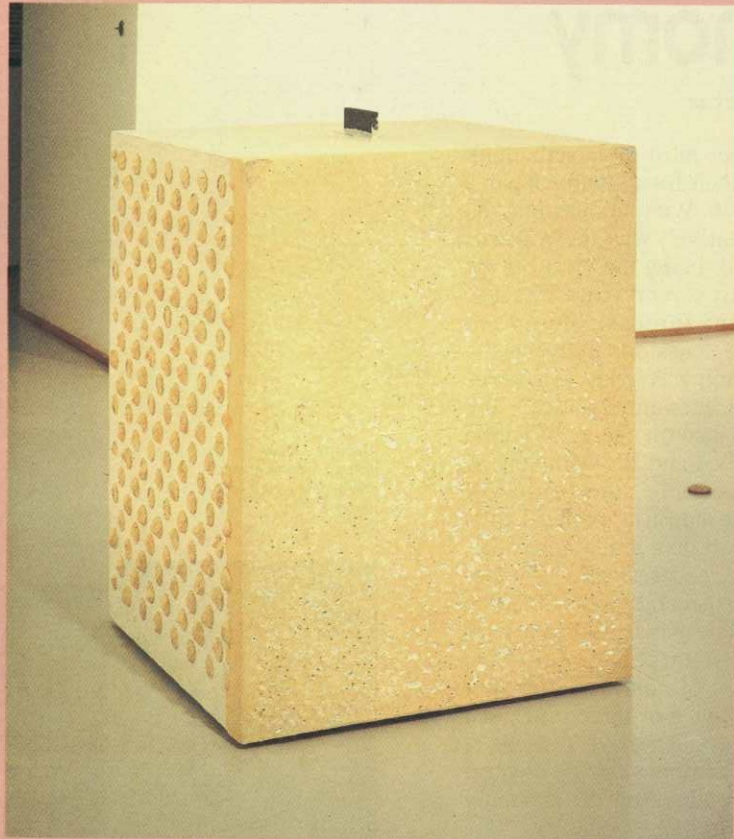
Bound by gravity, Wakabayashi's iron cannot help but be positioned on the ground. But his creations sometimes appear to defy this principle, seemingly flowing over the ground (displayed at the Karuizawa Sezon Museum of Art). By becoming one with organic nature, his works make nature inorganic. Accordingly, inorganic iron becomes organic material. In this way, existence becomes one with non-existence, and people discover a different, new nature without noticing that the object is in fact iron.

In terms of the transitions in Wakabayashi's work, since his discovery of iron soon after graduating from college, his developmental trajectory has been characterized by the use of many kinds of iron in many different ways. He used to use thin iron boards, for instance "chair and bed-like things, things that can be held in the hand, accouterments for a room," and around 1963 made pop-art type works with a superficial character making the board



Valleys, 1990; each: 271x142.5x2296cm (left side); steel. Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu. Installation view at Ikeda Akira Gallery/Taura, 1990.

surfaces uneven. In his next period he used iron exhaustively in clusters, in such late 1960s works as *Remaining Elements I, II, Cannibal in a Car, A Dog in—How to Fly*. In his well-known 1970s series that included *Oscillating Scale* and *One Hundred Raindrops*, he combined iron with other materials such as copper, brass and wood. These works were based on a fascination, stemming from his experience of living in Europe, with climate and topography and other changes in nature. In the 1980s, he enlarged his scale, with his iron becoming even more organic. The series *On the Invasion of Grass and Personal Belongings* fits into this period. In the 1990s, the importance of iron in his work weakened, and the form of his works diversified. Having developed a stronger interest in society and the environment, he began to incorporate wood, acrylic, steel and magnetic material in his work. This period includes the series *Everest Hotel*, and the installation *Valleys*.



Everest Hotel VII, 1991; 95x74.5x71cm; acrylic, sulfur, linen, iron and wood.



Valleys, 1990; each: 271x142.5x2286cm (right side); steel. Photo by Yamamoto Tadasu. Installation view at Ikeda Akira Gallery/Taura, 1990.

In 30 years of work, Wakabayashi has made more than 3,000 rough sketches. This stands out not only as proof of the diversity of his characteristic motifs, but also as the eternal vestiges of an art that goes beyond the name of the artist—he goes on record as having positioned the self in opposition to nature in his work.

In the world of modern Japanese art, Wakabayashi is a truly remarkable artist who simply cannot be ignored.

Sources:

¹Wakabayashi: "Inside a landscape" in *Shingusho* Vol. 3, October, 1982

²Ibid

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