

Isamu Noguchi: Stones and Paper

[CHRISTO] Isamu Noguchi is one of the most important artists in the 20th century. Isamu was very, very generous in the satisfaction of what you see. You see incredible, wistful forms, very sensual, exceptional proportions, movements, color.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] We are what we are, things appear what they are, because of their quality of gravity. That is they exist there as a resolution of gravity, you see? You can be fighting it, or you can be one with it.

[I.M. PEI] He liked to experiment. And that's why I don't think you'll find a consistent style in his work. He can jump from one to the other. From stone to metal, from abstract forms to something that are completely metaphysical, almost beyond abstraction.

[NARRATOR] Isamu Noguchi took sculpture outside the confines of galleries and museums claiming for it a central place in our lives.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] In a sense, maybe I'm against sculpture. I'm more interested in the spaces, really.

[NARRATOR] Isamu Noguchi's friend, Buckminster Fuller, called him a 'founding member of an Omni-Crossbred World Society.' Son of an Irish American mother and a Japanese father, he was made to feel an outsider in both the United States and Japan for much of his life. In his autobiography he wrote, [IN] "With my double nationality and double upbringing, where was my home? Where my affections? Where my identity, Japan or America? Either? Both? Or the world?"

[ARNE GLIMCHER] He was part of the New York scene. He was friendly with de Kooning. He was friendly with all of the artists. But Noguchi always liked to hold himself a little bit apart.

[MASATOSHI IZUMI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] He would say, the things that come from America are no good. So please don't try to copy them. He would criticize his own country and praise Japan. But if we complained about New York, he wouldn't stand for it.

[I.M. PEI] I don't think he, himself, really felt comfortable in either world. That's my feeling. And yet, he belongs to both.

[HISAO DOMOTO, SPEAKING JAPANESE] In New York, when I met Mr. Noguchi, Isamu, I should say, his eyes looked black, the irises. In Japan, they looked blue.

[J.B. BLUNK] And he said, you know, some of the best work I've ever done in my life, design wise, conception wise, has been done in hotel rooms. He said, because I'm always traveling.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I go inside, I go out. I breathe in, I breathe out. I mean, I cannot be alone all the time. I need to be out and communicate with people. I cannot be constantly in communication and not be alone. And therefore, I'm always searching from one to the other, and I find it quite a normal process.

[NARRATOR] It was a search that began in 1924 New York. Calvin Coolidge was president. F. Scott Fitzgerald was finishing 'The Great Gatsby.' And Duke Ellington held court at the Cotton Club. A pre-med student at Columbia University, 20-year-old Isamu Noguchi signed up for a night class in sculpting. Within three months, he held his first show. Whatever else he might question in life, from that moment Noguchi knew he was an artist. He quit college and rented a studio. His prodigious talent proved both help and hindrance.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] If you have too facile a technique, then you express only those things which the technique permits.

[NARRATOR] He sought out other sculptors and came across the work of a Paris-based Romanian, Constantin Brancusi. Brancusi no longer reproduced a subject, he distilled it.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I was transfixed by his vision. The concept was not imposed but was inherent in the relationship of artist to his material.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi made his way to Paris. A chance remark in a cafe led to Brancusi's door. And the young artist spent the next several months in the master's studio—working, watching, learning.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] He spoke no English, and I no French. Communication was through the eyes, through gestures, and through the materials and tools to be used.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi began to make abstract sculptures of his own.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Brancusi said to me, you belong to the new generation who will go directly to abstraction without having to abstract from nature as mine has done. I remember wondering whether he was bequeathing a blessing or a curse. I felt myself too young and inexperienced for abstractions. I would have to live first.

[NARRATOR] New Yorkers seemed to agree. Not one of Noguchi's Paris sculptures sold. To support himself he fell back on what did sell: portrait heads.

[NANCY GROVE] I think he was deeply ambivalent about the portraits. He had undertaken the portraits at a time when his abstract sculpture was not earning him any income. And at the beginning of the depression, it was a way not only to pay the rent but also to keep making art. They enabled him to meet new people which was important for a young artist coming back from Paris.

[NARRATOR] George Gershwin was an early patron. Noguchi's bust of dancer Martha Graham led to an artistic collaboration, Graham's tribute to the pioneer experience, 'Frontier.' She'd later recalled, "Isamu brought me this very simple elegant thing, just ropes indicating the distance, the trail, and the tracks of a railroad train and the inevitable fence that gets built." Noguchi would design sets for Graham and other choreographers for the next three decades. Noguchi's sets and Graham's movement infused their shared space with an almost magical resonance.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] We had to find a dance theater with an emotionally charged space which, of course, is sculpture. It is the sculpture of space.

[NARRATOR] One portrait subject, Lincoln Kirstein, later founded the New York City Ballet. He arranged a show of Noguchi's work with that of yet another portrait subject, Buckminster Fuller. They showed Noguchi's heads and Fuller's aluminum house. The two men shared a talent for invention and an eye for women. They became lifelong friends and Noguchi helped make models of Fuller's visionary designs. Architect Shoji Sadao worked with both men.

[SHOJI SADAO] I think one of the ways that Bucky used to characterize himself, and I guess maybe it would fit with Isamu too, is that they were kind of random elements in society. That you couldn't really place them in any sort of pigeonhole. Bucky was a

philosopher, poet, scientist, architect, mathematician, you might say. Isamu was a sculptor, also a landscape sculptor, furniture designer, stage set designer. Their interests were much larger than these kind of words that would limit what you were. They just did what they wanted to do.

[NARRATOR] Fuller's expansive optimism and his faith in design encouraged Noguchi to work outside art's traditional boundaries.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Bucky was, for me, the truth of structure which circumvented questions of art.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi's ideas about art had another source, the land of his childhood and his father, Japan. At 26 he decided to return. But word came from his father warning him not to call himself Noguchi in Japan. He was born Isamu Gilmour. Léonie Gilmour, unconventional, serious, idealistic, had studied at Bryn Mawr and the Sorbonne. His father, Yone Noguchi, was a Japanese poet who made a name for himself while traveling across America. The two met and became lovers in turn of the century New York. They never married. In 1904, Yone Noguchi returned to Japan alone. Isamu was born some months later. Léonie took refuge with her family in Los Angeles. Then Yone summoned her to Japan.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] My earliest recollections are of a house in Tokyo where we arrived; myself, age two, from America, my mother a stranger. The house belonged to my father. Who was he?

[NARRATOR] Poet and later professor, Yone Noguchi remained an elusive, infuriating figure to his son. The three lived together at first, then Yone married a Japanese woman. He saw his American family only rarely after that. Leonie left Tokyo for the seaside village of Chigasaki. She found work teaching English.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Mother decided to build a house and insisted that we must do it together, close to the sea on the edge of a pine grove. She taught me botany and read to me according to her taste. As a result, I believed in Apollo and all the gods of Olympus long before I knew any other.

[NARRATOR] When Isamu was 8, his sister Ailes was born.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Don't ask me who her father was, maybe my father. I don't know.

[NARRATOR] When he turned 13, his mother sent him to Indiana to a progressive school she'd read about in 'Scientific American.' She and his sister stayed behind.

[DORE ASHTON] I do really believe that he went through his life feeling displaced. And that's natural enough, because if you see pictures of Isamu when he was this little boy that his mother sent off to America and didn't see again for years, he was all by himself in an alien place.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] In America, I was regarded as a foreigner and a bit of a freak, I guess.

[NARRATOR] The US entered World War I that fall. The army commandeered Isamu's school. A minister's family took him in and LaPorte, Indiana, friends and neighbors, came to know him as Sam. When he went to college in New York, his mother and sister rejoined him. It was Léonie who had encouraged him in art, but on the eve of his first show, Sam Gilmour renamed himself Isamu Noguchi.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I associated art with my childhood in Japan. It had nothing to do with my father, whom I bitterly resented.

[HISAO DOMOTO, SPEAKING JAPANESE] Isamu identified with his father, the Keio University professor. But at the same time, he was the one who had abandoned Isamu's mother. There had to be a certain amount of resentment. The two feelings must have been all tied up together. Only Isamu could really tell you how he felt.

[NARRATOR] Isamu's planned reunion with his father drew a warning not to use the name Noguchi in Japan. Taken aback, he stopped in Peking to study ink drawing. After eight months' delay, Isamu reached Tokyo. Japan was preparing for war. It bore little resemblance to his childhood memories. His father, the bohemian poet, had become a professor and a father of a large Japanese family. Their encounter with chilly and formal.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] We would hold long, silent conversations. Two months of this was enough. I fled to Kyoto and applied myself to making terracottas. I have since thought of my lonely self incarceration then and my close embrace of the earth as a seeking after identity with some primal matter beyond personalities and possessions.

[NARRATOR] When Japan invaded Manchuria, he fled. There was no place for Isamu Noguchi in Japan. New York was in the bitter embrace of the Depression. Noguchi's mother, who had scraped by selling Japanese crafts, died of pneumonia at the age of 60. "Everything I do," he later said, "is in a sense what she might have wished." The WPA, or Works Progress Administration, was funding art in public places. Noguchi submitted his ideas.

[DORE ASHTON] He had this marvelous, excessive dream, which any bureaucrat in a state would certainly refuse, and they did refuse. Such as the Monument to the Plow, which he described was supposed to be something like a mile long at the base, and one side would be planted, and one side would be fallow and it would follow the seasons. These were all huge dreams that he had and, of course, lots of people now see, they were precursors to what was later called earth art.

[NARRATOR] Play Mountain was to be a city park. Its contoured terrain, the play structure. It too was rejected. Noguchi's vision of America was not always benign. 'Death (Lynched Figure)' irritated New York critic Henry McBride. "As a work of art, it is just a little Japanese mistake."

[SHOJI SADAŌ] He wanted to do work that was socially relevant. He wanted to have some meaning, and some use, and some significance, in an ordinary person's life, in his furniture designs, also doing stage sets, and public works, landscape architecture, that was something that people could really participate.

[NARRATOR] Frustrated by criticism and rejections, Noguchi found a place where he could work on a grand scale, the Mexico City of muralist Diego Rivera. Joining an artist collective at work on an indoor market, Noguchi spent eight months covering a 72 foot wall with colored cement. His mural denounced fascism and war, celebrated labor, and portrayed hope for the future. His experience in Mexico helped Noguchi win a contest in New York to design the entrance for the new Associated Press Building in Rockefeller Center. It took a year to mold the full scale plaster and cast it in stainless steel. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor changed everything. Within two months, the US government began forcing west coast Japanese Americans into relocation camps.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I realized I was no longer the sculptor alone. I was not just American but Japanese American. I felt I must do something.

[NARRATOR] As a New Yorker, Noguchi was exempt, but he voluntarily entered an internment camp in Poston, Arizona. He drew up plans to redesign the camp but officials ignored them. He proposed art workshops for internees.

[JAMES HIRABAYASHI] He started his program for the arts and crafts, but he wasn't very successful. And after about three months, he wanted to get out. Noguchi was a very sophisticated and cosmopolitan person. Psychologically, socially, and culturally, he didn't have anything in common with the Japanese Americans.

[NARRATOR] It took four months to talk his way out. Returning to New York, he turned away from message laden work. He found thin sheets of stone cut for building facades in nearby construction yards. He sawed, shaped, polished, and fit them together into sculptures that were at once substantial and fragile.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] A minimum of material is necessary. And you can use the space in between, the interlocking pieces involved, the gravity in precarious balance.

[NARRATOR] The cool surrealism of these slotted, stone puzzles, earned Noguchi a place in art history. In 1946, they were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in an exhibition called '14 Americans.' At 42, Isamu Noguchi had won the recognition he'd long sought. But a new movement, abstract expressionism, was about to sweep aside less dramatic work.

[NANCY GROVE] Although Noguchi was friends with David Smith and Arshile Gorky, in particular, and Willem de Kooning and other card carrying members of the New York school, he didn't fit the myth of the All-American macho wrestler with materials who would wrest the reins of modern art away from the Europeans and establish this new frontier in New York.

[NARRATOR] Critic Clement Greenberg, a Jackson Pollock supporter, accused Noguchi of excessive taste, excessive polish, and smoothness of surface, excessive clarity, and precision of drawing. "Where is strength? Where are profundity and originality?" Angry at what he called the politics of art, Noguchi packed his bags. With a travel grant, he set off around the world.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I wanted to know what sculpture had done, what it was in time and place in former days, how it related to people's ceremonial view of life. Sculpture had to be an important part of the living experience and not just something for collectors to buy.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi's last stop was Japan. He knew there would be no awkward meetings or reconciliation with his father. Yone Noguchi had died in 1947. But shortly before, he told his youngest son, Michio, that he had an American half brother.

[MICHIO NOGUCHI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] It was right after Japan lost the war, and the educational system of those days had made me a real military boy. And I was suddenly told I had a brother in the US. It really shocked me.

[NARRATOR] Michio and Isamu became close.

[MICHIO NOGUCHI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] My brother spoke a very childish, funny kind of Japanese at that time. I took care of him almost like an assistant.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi's welcome extended far beyond family.

[KOJI TAKAHASHI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] In his own words, "I was welcomed like the pigeon harbinger after the deluge." The country, a lot of it, was devastated. People's morale had also been eroded. In this setting, Noguchi arrived and made a big impression on the young Japanese artists who were confused and disoriented.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I suggested that to be modern did not mean to copy us but to be themselves, looking to their own roots for strength and inspiration.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi revisited Kyoto's historic stroll gardens. Deceptively simple, they revealed their hidden beauty as visitors follow the pathways.

[ISAMU 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.

[NARRATOR] The dry garden of Ryōan-ji in a Zen Buddhist monastery, dates back to the 16th century.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] One feels that the rocks were not just placed there, but they grow out of the Earth. Yet perhaps for this very reason, they seem to float like the peaks of mountains. Here is an immaculate universe swept clean.

[NARRATOR] Faced with the task of rebuilding, Japanese architects welcomed new ideas. Noguchi was asked by Keio University, where his father had taught, to design a faculty room in his memory. It combines old and new, Japan and the west.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] The strength of a tradition lies in its adaptability to continuous change.

[NARRATOR] He designed two access bridges for Hiroshima's Peace Park, but city officials rejected his plan for the central Hiroshima Memorial. Noguchi was, after all, an American.

[KOJI TAKAHASHI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] To a person who wanted to become a bridge between Japan and America, the American atomic bomb was a terrible source of guilt. Looking at that project now, I think that if it had been built, the whole world would have applauded it.

[NARRATOR] Passing through Gifu, a city known for its paper lanterns, Noguchi toured a lantern workshop. He had already experimented with sculptures lit from within, now he envisioned a new kind of light sculpture.

[HIDETARO OZEKI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] Looking at the first lantern we made, it was a very bizarre shape, not the kind of thing we had ever seen before. I remember doubting whether this would ever sell.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi's paper lanterns came to be celebrated around the world as a marriage of form with function. He called them 'Akari' or light, both sun and moon, illumination and weightlessness. The ribs are thin strips of bamboo. The handmade paper comes from the inner bark of mulberry trees.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Paper lanterns are soon destroyed, but maybe you get another one. I think that aspect is something that I also learned from Japan. That they appreciate that things pass, life passes, the cherry blossoms are blown away, but the art in life remains.

[NARRATOR] In this time of experiment and discovery, Noguchi's own life took an unexpected turn.

[YOSHIKO YAMAGUCHI, IN FILM] Eddie, don't you have someone that would worry if you were in danger?

["EDDIE"] Everyone has somebody who worries about them.

[NARRATOR] Yoshiko Yamaguchi had begun her acting career in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, fleeing to Japan after the war. Success in Japan led to work as Shirley Yamaguchi in America. Her 1952 wedding to Isamu Noguchi made headlines in Japan. He was 47, she was 32. They settled far from cosmopolitan Tokyo in a small farmhouse that belonged to the celebrated potter, Rosanjin Kitaoji. Sculptor J. B. Blunk was a GI stationed in Japan when he first met Noguchi.

[J.B. BLUNK] Isamu was in a state of innocence. He was very high on his freedom to do what he wanted to and to be with someone that he was so in love with.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi carved a studio in the hillside behind the house. And with Rosanjin's kiln, began creating new forms from age old materials. He wrote to a friend:

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] We are sitting in our little garden to enjoy the autumn sun. Before us, the rice has now been cut. I am anxious to get your reaction to my new work. It's not just work, but work as a reflection of living.

[JEANNE-CLAUDE] Just objects created by a human being who obviously was having fun. But because he is the one who did it, they were also beautiful.

[CHRISTO] He was energizing the living space around him. And that space was everything living, like going to bed, to the sitting in a chair, go to the table, to work in the garden, and that space he energized in a very simple way, in the very end with beauty.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi liked to see his wife in a kimono. She found them stiff and old fashioned.

[MICHIO NOGUCHI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] He split the kimono into a top and bottom, a two piece suit, and the sash was fastened with a zipper. The outside looked just like a kimono, nothing changed. But it was much easier to wear.

[NARRATOR] Success lured them out of the country and away from each other.

[J.B. BLUNK] During their separation I was in Los Angeles, and I saw her many times, and they couldn't get together because he had something he was working on in New York, and she was making a movie and neither, it seemed, was willing to give in. I do know that

when they did separate and when they were divorced, I know that was a major, major trauma to his life.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi showed his ceramics in New York. Though they were well received, he never again did such playful, personal work. A 1956 commission in Paris offered new possibilities. UNESCO, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, wanted a courtyard designed. Noguchi proposed a Japanese inspired garden as well. He hand selected 88 tons of rocks in Japan and persuaded the government to ship them to Paris. He also brought a veteran gardener.

[DORE ASHTON] Mr. Sano, who was a 16th generation master of the garden, tried to educate Isamu in the principles of gardens. And Isamu one day came and he saw Sano planting shrubs in front of his sculpture and he got furious. He ran and over and he kicked away the newly planted shrubs. And said, what are you doing? And it happened twice, that he kicked away the shrubs. In Sano's opinion, Isamu simply was a Western artist who didn't understand anything about Japanese principles.

[NARRATOR] UNESCO would lead to more gardens and more public spaces. Architect Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, asked Noguchi to design a courtyard for Yale's Rare Book Library. Noguchi proposed a garden of white marble.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Its size is of infinite space or cloistered containment. There's a difference between actual cubic feet of space and the additional space the imagination supplies.

[NARRATOR] Bunshaft's Wall Street tower for Chase Manhattan Bank needed a humanizing counterpart. Noguchi called his solution "my Ryōan-ji." His water garden is dry in winter and a fountain in summer.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Instead of being part of the Earth, the rocks burst forth, seeming to levitate out of the ground. At least that is the intention.

[I.M. PEI] He used water a lot. Water comes, disappear, and then reemerge again. So therefore, it's a different kind of use of water then let's say a fountain or something that you see in Versailles. No, very, very subtle.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi was invited to Jerusalem in 1960 to create a sculpture garden for the Israel Museum.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] The sea of stones of Israel's hills lap into the garden. Inside the garden, the landscape surges and touches the horizon.

[NARRATOR] At the summit of his dry rock hewn sculpture garden, Noguchi made a fountain from a stone he'd found in the Negev Desert.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I think of gardens as a kind of proof of the work of sculpture. I don't mean sculpture as objects on stands in museums, let us say. But sculpture as experience in life, in the environment of people. They experience together with it as they walk around.

[NARRATOR] At 60, Noguchi was world famous. He joined other distinguished sculptors in residence at an Italian marble quarry. Using the quarry's craftsmen and equipment, Noguchi found new ways to fashion stone. He made slender curving shapes in stone. He experimented with color, using epoxy glue to combine slices of stone. And he began to let stone be stone, leaving quarry marks on a finished piece.

[I.M. PEI] He had a wonderful, very fertile imagination. When you look at a work of his, you know it's by Noguchi. But my gosh, you say, this is very different from something else that I have seen. Now you won't say that of Calder. You certainly won't say that of Nevelson.

[NARRATOR] Having mastered Italian marble, Noguchi turned to what he called the, "hard stones. Real stones." And a place where people work with such stones, Japan. The island of Shikoku was still reached by ferry when Noguchi arrived in the village of Mure in 1968. He hired a young stone cutter named Masatoshi Izumi to help with his monumental 'Black Sun' for the Seattle Art Museum. The two would work together until Noguchi's death.

[MASATOSHI IZUMI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] Isamu Noguchi could move the people around him as if they were his own arms and legs. It was like two hearts beating as one.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] Work is something like having a conversation with oneself, a personal soliloquy in which through argument and trial you try to nail something down, express the inexplicable.

[BRUCE ALTSHULER] Noguchi had to, in some way, fight against the way in which he could readily produce work that looked extremely good in any form of art that he embraced. This is one reason, I think, that towards the end of his life, he was drawn to the working of hard stone. With basalt, with granite, the carving is extremely slow. The carving is very difficult. And he finally came to approach the working process that is more closely associated with the gestural painters or action painters of the 1950s, working, pulling back, looking for a long time before cutting again. His work becoming, as New York School artists were fond of saying, a record of his accidents.

[MASATOSHI IZUMI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] Sometimes he would cut a big stone and think he had cut too much and be very disappointed. He wouldn't know what to do next. If he left it for a while, a year or two, the stone would heal like people who have cut their hand or something. Probably the thoughts in Mr. Noguchi's head changed in the meantime. But the stone also had a change of color, and its beauty emerged again.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi still pursued large scale projects for part of each year in New York.

[SHOJI SADAŌ] He was not just concerned with the sculpture itself, but also the space that the sculpture would occupy. And that was as important to him as the sculpture he was working on. He would often, when an architect came to him and showed him a project, he would just redesign the building or the space around there. And it got to the point where, I think, there was some architects who didn't want to work with him because they knew that he would take over a certain portion of the project which they didn't want to relinquish.

[I.M. PEI] He may want to cut holes in my building. I don't know. But I have a feeling that his interests beyond just doing a piece, unless you buy it from him and put it there, I think he would want to make it into, become architecture itself.

[NARRATOR] When a community group in Los Angeles asked for a sculpture, Noguchi obliged. But he made the architects shift a second proposed building for the courtyard he also designed.

[HUGH HARDY] When we were planning the Los Angeles County Art Museum, the extension there, he expected that this would be an opportunity for the museum to buy his great piece, 'Energy Void,' which is this enormous polished granite piece. And he came and said he wanted to give me photographs, which he did, and explained to me how the gallery should be designed. And I said, that would be wonderful. And he said, it should be a complete circle and he gave me the dimensions and height and so forth. And he said, the piece would look best that way. And furthermore, they'll never be able to hang pictures in it. They didn't buy the piece. And it's now in Japan.

[NARRATOR] When Detroit renewed its downtown, Noguchi designed a gathering place around his computer controlled fountain. A southern California real estate developer wanted a fountain. Noguchi gave him a 1.6 acre public plaza, a microcosm of California's many landscapes.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] I think of sculpture as something to be completely experienced, not just looked at. You're an integral part of it. Your environment is your sculpture, your world. It IS the world, and the world then becomes a sculpture.

[NARRATOR] At the age of 77, Noguchi began work on his own museum across the street from his studio in Queens. In 1985, the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum opened to the public.

[HUGH HARDY] He found this factory, which is oddly shaped—there are hardly two parallel surfaces anywhere in Queens—and exploring the richness of that so that you're both inside and outside at the same time. There's the level changes inside, the movement of light, you move through that space with constant discovery.

[CHRISTO] He was very passionately involved doing that museum. He take that quite bleak area in Long Island City and he created some inner space, very simple, almost surreal.

[ARNE GLIMCHER] The body of work is ravishing. And the achievements are all there. Isamu liked to keep the very best of the works. Very often, there would be two stones and one was good and one was great, and he'd sell the good one and keep the great one. He was wonderfully terrible that way. There was a commission once for a major work and

the work was finished in Japan, I saw it in Japan. And he said, this is much too good to give them. I'm going to make another one for them and keep this one, which he did.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi gradually turned his workspace in Mure into a living and exhibition space, as well, where he returned each spring and fall.

[MASATOSHI IZUMI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] At night, we always ate here. And while eating, he would tell me, Mr. Izumi, the craze for money and cars that will sooner or later arrive here from America is not so good. I was very young myself. And those were the things I wanted most: cars and money. So it gave me plenty to think about. However, in the long run, working and living with him helped me discover what is most important in life.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] The deepest values are to be found in the nature of each medium, how to transform but not destroy this.

[DORE ASHTON] The late stones, which to my mind, are the apogee of his life's work, and I have a very high regard for them. I think you find a memory of all the ancient places he'd been where you very often find these vertical, from Stonehenge on, these vertical presences. And I don't think you can actually denote what they are. But I think they many connotations. The most important being human beings standing on the earth. And I think that's more or less what drove that image, this kind of sum of the human character which is to be vertical.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] To me, that object I work on with stone, I work on not alone but with history. With everything that I know and can call sculpture: nature, the wind, and the stars, where we come from, where we go to, all of the factors that have to do with our being on Earth, are to me, close to stone.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi was at the height of his powers. Internationally acclaimed, he was no longer an outsider. But his restless searching continued.

[NANCY GROVE] When I went to visit his studio in Mure, he announced that he was leaving the next day, because he couldn't work. His back was bothering him and there was no reason to stay in a place where you couldn't accomplish something. You moved on.

[PRISCILLA MORGAN] He was married, as you know, briefly, and had many love affairs in his life. He was a very glamorous, beautiful, handsome man. But he wanted to be free. It's as simple as that. His work came first. And I think he felt that marriage or having a family would intrude upon that work.

[HISAO DOMOTO, SPEAKING JAPANESE] He was a kid with his nose pressed against the window, an enfant terrible, perhaps. This was not just a negative thing. It was Isamu's freedom, I think.

[NARRATOR] Noguchi is a traveler, said the composer Toru Takemitsu. What Noguchi brings back from his travels is always something that enriches me and makes me aware of new places on my own map. True travel is endless.

[MASATOSHI IZUMI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] He said, this place wasn't Japan. It wasn't Mure either. It is my place. I want to make it my place, is what he said.

[DORE ASHTON] It was a place, and he made it his place. But he also made other places his place. I mean, his place in Long Island is just as much his place. I was just in the sculpture garden in Jerusalem two weeks ago, and I realized, once again, how amazingly successful he was in making his place, a place, it has the mark of his hand, everything there still today.

[MASATOSHI IZUMI, SPEAKING JAPANESE] At one point in the studio, standing in front of this stone that had been there for years, he pointed at it and he said to me, Izumi San, it's OK for me to go in there, isn't it? It startled me, because he was still in very good shape. And I told him, it was too early for him to go into the stone. It turned out that he didn't have that much time left before really going into a stone.

[ISAMU NOGUCHI] There is a kind of relationship that has nothing to do with a message. It has to do with people's places in the world, their sense of belonging. I think that kind of thing can be suggested by art.