

## Cosmic Graveyard

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In 1933, Isamu Noguchi, who had been mostly making portrait plaques, heads and figurative work for over eight years, had finally become fed up with this method of making art and money. A new impulse for connectedness with society at large (not limited to a sitter), a need to experience working in more space and “a desire to get into another realm, another dimension”<sup>1</sup> akin to going to the Moon, overtook him. His disappointment with portraiture and his own feelings of loneliness led to a revelation that he needed to find a more expansive role for sculpture to keep himself engaged. This ultimately motivated him to strike out in new directions which were manifested in three major project proposals that in many ways became the cornerstones for much of his thinking over the next five decades of working.

The first project was called *Monument to the Plough* which Noguchi describes as “a triangular pyramid about a mile wide at each base. One side would be ploughed, another planted, and the third left fallow. At the apex would be a plough designed by Jefferson and Franklin. It was meant to be placed in Idaho.”<sup>2</sup> There is no existing model for this piece in the museum’s collection, only a copy of the original drawing, which was lost.

The second project was *Play Mountain*. This is the first of Noguchi’s forays into playgrounds as a form of social sculpture. His concept for *Play Mountain* was that it would take up a full city block, much like a skyscraper, and it would have steps, slides, water elements and even a sled run for the winter. For Noguchi, *Play Mountain* would act as the new town square, a place for groups of people to convene, enjoy and most importantly exercise their right to be playful in the center of the urban environment. This project was proposed to New York City Parks Commissioner, Robert Moses, and summarily rejected and according to Noguchi earned him Moses’ “perpetual antagonism”<sup>3</sup> for the rest of his career.

The third project from 1933 that Noguchi worked on was the *Monument to Ben Franklin*. The form of this monument was an inverted lightning bolt with a kite on top seeking electricity. Noguchi admired American inventors like Franklin and Alexander Graham Bell and felt that “They are the real

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<sup>1</sup> Isamu Noguchi. *Essays and Conversations*. Edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Bruce Altshuler. New York. Abrams, 1994 p 136

<sup>2</sup> *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*. Museum catalog. New York, 1987 p 144

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p 144

artists of America.”<sup>4</sup> This project was finally realized as the *Bolt of Lightning.. Memorial to Ben Franklin* in 1984 in Franklin’s home city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

From 1933 to 1940, Noguchi continued to pursue large-scale outdoor sculpture and made proposals to the WPA, a proposal in 1939 for a playground for the Dole Corporation in Hawaii and even attempted in 1935 to collaborate with architect Richard Neutra on a swimming pool for a Hollywood producer. In 1936, he was finally able, under the auspices of Diego Rivera and Marion and Grace Greenwood to create his first public work, *History of Mexico*, in the Alberto Rodriguez Market in Mexico City, in 1939-40 Noguchi’s *Ford Fountain* was installed at the New York World’s Fair, and in 1940 Noguchi unveiled his 40 foot stainless steel sculpture entitled *News*, at 50 Rockefeller Center Plaza on the facade of the Associated Press office building.

The 1940s were a complicated decade for Noguchi, with the start of World War II, his 1942 self-internment at the concentration camp in Poston, Arizona and the devastating dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in 1944, he was forced to reassess his relationship to art and its relationship to the world. The few large-scale projects that he proposed and made models for were grounded in the earth as a medium and took the form of *Contoured Playground*, 1941 and *This Tortured Earth*, 1943, a proposed earthwork memorial to the ravages of war. There are no existing other proposals for large scale works in our archive between 1943 - 1947. Noguchi at that time was focusing on developing his interlocking sculptures out of sheets of granite and marble, works he viewed as being able to carry on his back if necessary and fitting to a potentially wholly peripatetic sculptor. As well, he started to design sculptural tables for private clients and later his famous glass topped Coffee Table for Herman Miller in 1947, his lunar sculptures, wall hanging reliefs with light elements and several mixed media sculptures that explored gravity and counterweight.

In June 1947, Noguchi’s semi-estranged father, Yone Noguchi passed away at the age of 72 in Tokyo. Over the years there had been a rapprochement between the two and in May 1947 Noguchi had written to his father and sent him a care package with some necessities, which were now impossible to get in post-war Japan. The news of his father’s passing was another blow to Noguchi’s psyche. In the fall of 1947, he made a model on a one-foot square board with sand which he photographed, for a potential sculpture that he entitled *Sculpture to be Seen from Mars*. Noguchi in an interview with Paul Cummings in 1979 elucidates a bit about possible intentions for this work, “I felt that if the world was to survive, sculpture had to be an important part of the living experience and not just something that collectors could buy....I wanted to know what sculpture could do in space, what it had done. What it

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<sup>4</sup> Isamu Noguchi. *Essays and Conversations*. p 138

was in time and place in former days, how it related to people's ceremonial view of life....For instance in plazas, and so forth, there was a ceremonial use of sculpture as effigies or temple plazas or dancing spots."<sup>5</sup> One can hypothesize that this work was both a monument and a cosmic gravestone for his own father and maybe a memorial for all of mankind, whose survival after the atomic bombings was now more than ever in question. What is interesting about *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars*, is that it pushes the idea of the vantage point of viewing sculpture into the cosmos, or at least from the window of an airplane or Rocketship. We don't not have any notes about Noguchi's intention for its scale; it could have been as big as the state of Texas or the size of Manhattan. As well, this work, given its cosmic perspective, would be the kind of sculpture that would be ceremonial for humankind, a marker of humanity honest about its accomplishments, foibles, and possible existential condition.

On a formal level, this work is also syncretic as it recycles elements from Noguchi's earlier earth art proposals that he had made. The simple triangular nose of the face directly references *Play Mountain* and *Monument to the Plough*. The large ellipse like form that makes up the forehead, mimics some of the organic mound forms found in *Contoured Playground* and *This Tortured Earth*. Maybe, *Sculpture to Be Seen from Mars* can also be looked at as a kind of personal ceremony for Noguchi of the destruction and rebirth of one's own ideas.

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<sup>5</sup> Isamu Noguchi. *Essays and Conversations*. p 142