Nobuho Nagasawa
The Poetics of Place and Time
By Jonathan Goodman

Through sculpture, Nobuho Nagasawa expresses the concept of transporting the self, from pre-life to afterlife, on a vessel of light, bringing art into a realm where historical events, personal existence, and spiritual insights meet. Nagasawa was born in Japan, but she received her master’s degree in Berlin in 1985 and has been living in the United States for nearly 30 years. She currently works in New York and teaches at Stony Brook University. Though Nagasawa has an affinity for the visionary social sculpture of Joseph Beuys, her work is not nearly so ephemeral or improvisatory. Instead, she takes physical site, social context, and political meaning as the boundaries for public art. Working more or less entirely in public spaces, she combines a lyrical sense of form and color with a sensitivity to historical motivations. Though Nagasawa works primarily in the U.S., she has also completed projects in Japan, as well as in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

Navel of the Earth (1986), an early work in West Berlin’s Kreuzberg neighborhood, demonstrates that her concern with historical awareness and social responsibility dates to the start of her career. The project centered on a ruined synagogue, which was destroyed along with the rest of the area during World War II. Nagasawa proposed setting fire to the site in order to revitalize both the land and the emotional state of local residents, an action initially opposed by both the Jewish and German communities. After long negotiation, she obtained permission from the city and set the fire. Bullets and bones were found at the site, but in the following spring, Nagasawa comments, “Life came back to the earth, and the people embraced the site.” It remains alive today and serves as a gathering place. It is difficult to imagine a more moving reclamation of space. The waterfall plays out over the cobalt-blue boat, brilliantly lit but aged site into a working public space.

Nagasawa recently completed Transcendence of Justice, an inspiring homage to Martin Luther King Jr. at City University’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The permanent installation, commissioned in 2010 and finished in 2013, is suspended in an expansive open space. Strands of woven optical fiber resemble a waterfall flowing down from the high ceiling, as cobalt-blue and white lights pulse to the programmed sounds of the nearby Hudson River. In 1963, King sought to create a “mighty stream” that would push forward his mission for racial equality and social justice. With the use of spectrogram and algorithm, Nagasawa converted a line from King’s “I Have a Dream” speech — “We are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” — into blue and white light and united it with the pulsing cascade. In riveting abstract form, and with topically meaningful allusions, Transcendence of Justice expresses the power of King’s words and vision extremely well. The waterfall plays out over the space with an elegant simplicity: it is difficult to build a monument in honor of a great leader that does not literalize his or her history and consequently limit the frame of reference. But Nagasawa refused to literalize, creating instead a visual metaphor that also refers directly to King’s powerful oratory. Together, Navel of the Earth in Berlin and Transcendence of Justice in New York present Nagasawa’s ongoing concern with a lyrical lyricism that provides hope in the presence of loss or tragedy.

Voyage through the Void, 2013. Optical fiber, stainless steel, cable wire, LED illuminators and sound, 2 x 15 x 4 ft. Installation at Shūdōshima, Nagasawa Prefecture, Japan.
One of Nagasawa’s largest, and most impressive, undertakings, Ship Shape Shifting Time (commissioned in 1992 and completed in 2013) is an open-ship structure installed in San Francisco. Set within an 886-foot public area along Islais Creek, it commemorates U.S.-produced Liberty transport ships, which outlived World War II to become the dominant means of postwar cargo shipping, with a major fleet based in San Francisco. Nagasawa’s red skeletal structure reflects the actual dimensions of a Liberty ship: 50 feet by 442 feet by 35 feet. A cast iron bell and docking cleats lend historical accuracy. Landscaping provides an enhanced shoreline, while native vegetation recalls the hunting and gathering activities that took place here in an earlier era. The linear construction of the ship is remarkably eloquent, both formally and historically. The resonant outline achieves presence, perhaps more so than if an actual ship had been used.

Nagasawa is always open to the implications of time, and here she makes use of both near and distant history. Ship Shape Shifting Time is a powerful example of cooperation between an artist and civic government, resulting in an epic structure that captures a particular history through industrial poetry. To achieve this, Nagasawa mixes poetry with prose, combining the fleeting moment as exhilarating import to the timing of the artist’s heartbeat, thus personalizing and sharing Nagasawa’s experience of coming to the U.S. in 1986. On the mezzanine wall, a glass mural maps East Los Angeles and its connection to immigrant populations. Large silhouettes of silver birds are attached to the walls, accompanied by five suggestive phrases by poet George Quasha: WAKING WALKING, SKY INSIDE; EYES FLY HIGH TO NEST; MIND AWAKE AREA; WORDS BIRDS HOME; BETWEEN US. The language inspires us to consider the meaningfulness of the American immigrant experience, the next looks like a metaphor for home, a place of rest for birds that symbolize travel from one place to another, and perhaps the place of creativity in memorializing history. The walls are cobalt blue, as is the light falling from the ceiling onto the crystal-line egg. Here, Nagasawa uses symbolism to capture references to a past shared by almost all Americans. Through symbolic treatments of experience in art often confine a subject and limit it to a very small number of interpretations, the egg/ nest sculpture becomes a luminous sign of a new home; the symbolism is integral to visual meaning. A ritual reconstruction of a place to arrive at, the Landings offers the metro rider a brief insight into the larger meaning of traveling to another place and arriving home. This is historical reinterpretation of a high order, in large part because Nagasawa refuses to specify ethnic groups, celebrating instead the openness of American society.

Timecast, 2012. Native New York trees and blue-stone paving. Detail of installation in Brooklyn, NY. (This work received an Excellence in Design Award from the City of New York in 2007) Nagasawa, who concerns herself with relations between the urban and the natural environment, has here brought about a lyrical union, documenting human interaction amid the two joined worlds. The ability of art to forge a bridge linking nature to culture is clear. Nagasawa is remarkably resourceful in bringing together complex forms and images composed of multiple parts; she unifies our perception even as she entertains our gaze. The creativity of her work is always based on an intense response to the local environment, which proposes singular beauty even within the roughness of the urban domain. Enlivened by technology, as well as ideas and form, Nagasawa’s projects demonstrate how lyricism can survive by participating in the poetry of a specific place. Her sensibility successfully addresses the conditions of our time.

Jonathan Goodman is a writer living in New York.