

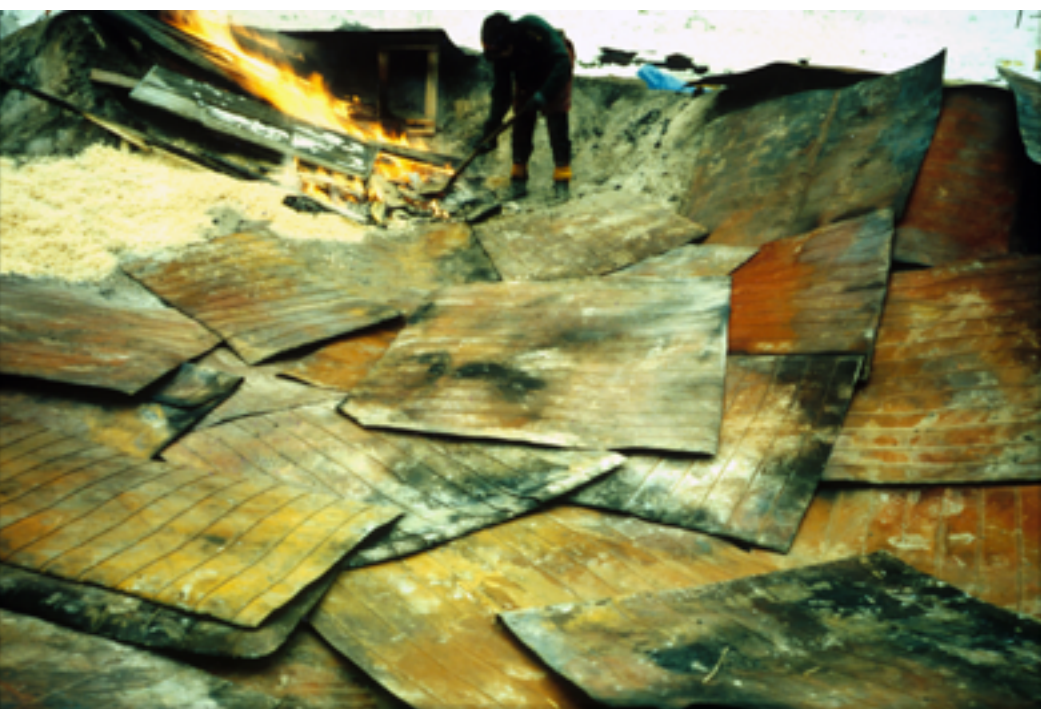
**Nobuho  
Nagasawa**

**The Poetics of  
Place and Time**

*Transcendence of Justice* (detail), 2013.  
Optical fiber, stainless steel, cable wire,  
and illuminator, 28.5 x 21.5 x 15.5 ft.  
Work installed at the John Jay College  
of Criminal Justice, NY.



Above: *Transcendence of Justice* (detail), 2013. Optical fiber, stainless steel, cable wire, and LED illuminators, 28.5 x 21.5 x 15.5 ft. Below: *Navel of the Earth*, 1986. Earth and fire, 11 x 43 x 46 ft. Work created in Berlin.



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, as 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 project — both a sculpture in the abstract and a revitalization of Jewish culture in Germany — transforms a damaged 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 visual lyricism that provides hope in the presence of loss or tragedy.

It is important to remember that sculpture has its origins in memorials for the dead. Nagasawa honors this inheritance, creating art determined by social forces and historical moments that need to be remembered — an endeavor for which the field of public sculpture is uniquely suited. She never forgets sculpture's relation to memory, which keeps a sense of justice alive, even if the incidents that she commemorates cannot be reshaped or revised for the better. Loss, one of the great themes in art, is thus transformed into hopeful expectation.

*Voyage through the Void* (2013) in Shōdoshima, Japan, consists only of a simple boat built from steel and woven optical fibers, but it has complex associations. Following the form of a traditional vessel Nagasawa saw at the Seto Island Sea Folk History Museum, the cobalt-blue boat, brilliantly lit but surrounded by darkness, can be en-

*Voyage through the Void*, 2013. Optical fiber, stainless steel, cable wire, LED illuminators and sound, 2 x 15 x 4 ft. Installation at Shōdo Island, Kagawa Prefecture, Japan.

tered, one at a time, by visitors, who are encouraged to enact a process of birth from the sea: in Japanese, the title has a double meaning — *Vessel (Container of the Sea)* and *Vessel (Womb of Life)* — pointing to the primal process of birth. Here, too, sound is an important element: Nagasawa recorded the sounds of the Inland Sea and synchronized the reverberations with the pulsing of the optical fiber. The water's movement thus becomes inseparable from the light that represents it. The sound and light effects can also be seen as a rendering of the beating heart — a primal experience made manifest by the viewer installed in the boat, whose movements change the intensity and duration of the light pulses. So, the sculpture has two goals: the commemoration of a particular Japanese people, who used boats to travel between the neighboring islands, and the universal human experience of life and death, often described as a journey, or voyage, through time.

TOP: ANDREAS RENTSCH / BOTTOM: ADIB FRITCKE

DAIGO ISHII



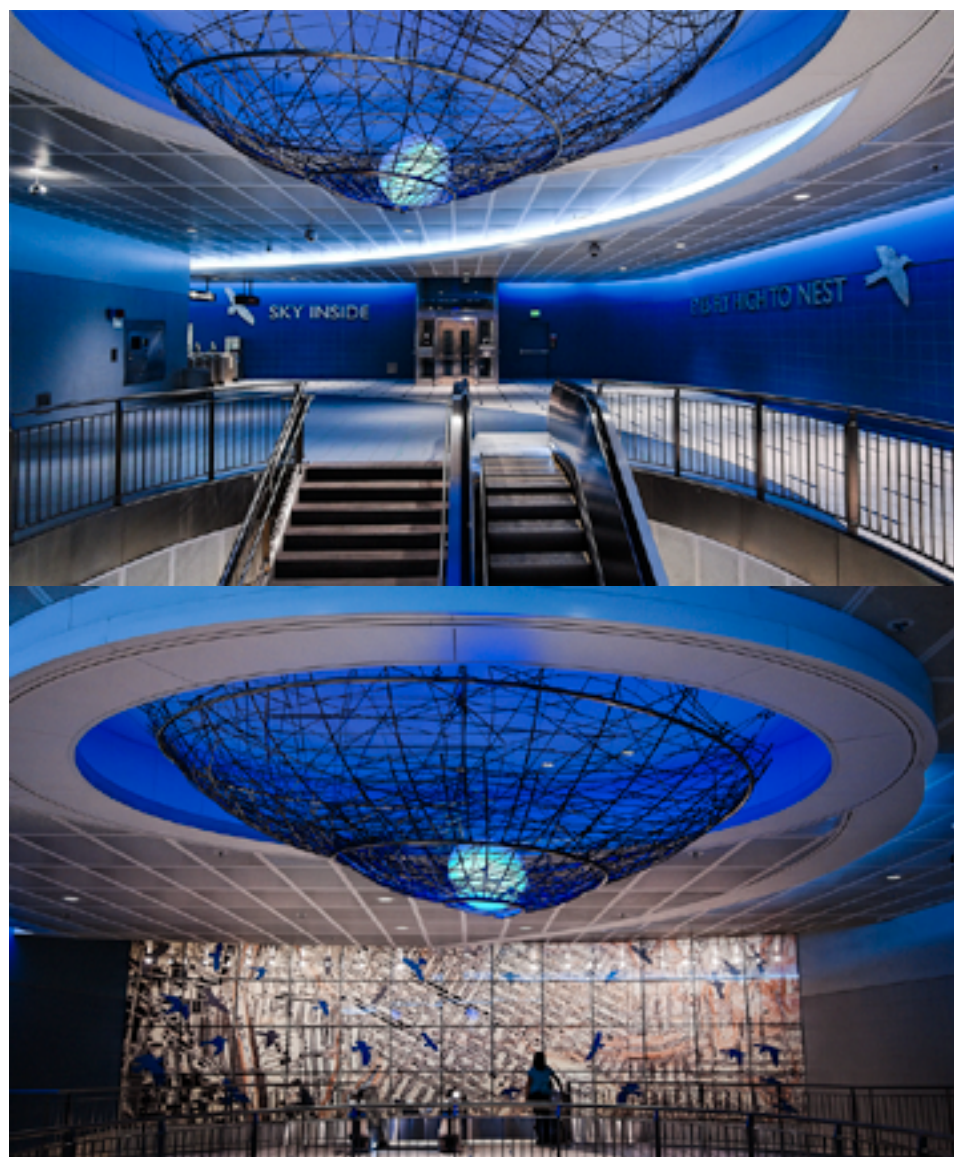
*Ship Shape Shifting Time*, 2013. Painted galvanized steel, steel cables, concrete, historical cleats and bell, sandblasted concrete pavers, lighting and landscape, 50 x 441.5 x 35 ft. Work installed in San Francisco.

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 860-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 experience with a clear-sited sense of the tenacious, often lengthy hold of history. Actual events, if they are to prove memorable, should be tied to a poetic notion of time, in which the metaphorical meaning of what took place possesses just as much importance as the historical occurrence. Nagasawa regularly commits herself to both memory and metaphysics, relying on their conflation for the creation of her work.

*Landings* (authorized in 1996 and inaugurated in 2009), a public sculpture commissioned by the Los Angeles Met-

*Landings*, 2009. Aluminum, glass, stainless steel, cast acrylic egg, and LED, dimensions variable. Work at Soto Station, Metro Gold Line, L.A.



TOP: PERRETTI AND PARK / BOTTOM: COURTESY LOS ANGELES COUNTY METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY



*Timecast*, 2012. Native New York trees and bluestone paving. Detail of installation in Brooklyn, NY.

ropolitan Authority for a metro station in East Los Angeles, pays homage to the neighborhood's history as a destination for newly arrived immigrants. Evocative of travel, home, and flight, the major component in this multi-part environment is a 15-foot stainless-steel spiral sculpture resembling a bird's nest, complete with a large egg, lit from within. It pulses according 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 nest 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. As 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* (commissioned in 2004 and finished in 2012) is poetic in the extreme. Along a Brooklyn waterfront bikeway lined with 110 trees, Nagasawa sandblasted the cast shadows of six newly planted native trees onto the bluestone pavement. Each shadow is accompanied by the name of the tree and the date and time of its tracing, thus fixing the action in time. The bluestone, a traditional New York building material, alludes to the city's construction history. As the trees grow and increase in size, the shadows will mark their state

when they were first planted on Columbia Street. (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.

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<http://art.stonybrook.edu/nagasawa/>

<http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/water-weaving-light-interactive>