



SOMETHING TO DECLARE
BY MAGGIE KINSER-SAIKI
PORTRAIT OF TAKENOBU IGARASHI BY MASARU MERA

TAKENOBU IGARASHI

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"FOR THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, I'VE DONE WHATEVER ROUSED MY CURIOSITY: ALPHABET SCULPTURES, ARCHITECTURAL GRAPHICS, ENVIRONMENTAL GRAPHICS, PRODUCT DESIGN . . . FINALLY, BIT BY BIT, I'VE STARTED TO REALIZE WHAT I REALLY WANT TO DO. MAYBE I'M A LITTLE SLOW." □ AT 47, TAKENOBU IGARASHI, ORIGINALLY A GRAPHIC DESIGNER AND BEST KNOWN FOR HIS AXONOMETRIC LETTERS AND PRODUCT DESIGNS FOR THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, HAS REACHED A STAGE OF MATURITY AND UNDERSTANDING THAT GIVES FORCE TO HIS WORDS AS HE DESCRIBES THE PLACE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF DESIGN AND THE DESIGNER IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY. FOR IGARASHI BELIEVES IT IS TIME BUSINESS AND DESIGN MADE CLOSE FRIENDS AND ADVISORS OF ONE ANOTHER, AND THE CONSUMER WAS GIVEN A CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE GOOD DESIGN DAILY. □

"FUNCTION IS THE PURPOSE OF DESIGN," HE ASSERTS, WITH THE PROFOUND AND INFECTIOUS CONFIDENCE OF A CONVERT. MANY OF IGARASHI'S STATEMENTS IN THIS PIVOTAL PERIOD IN HIS CAREER IMPLY THAT HE HAS ABANDONED PURELY GRAPHIC, OR TWO-DIMENSIONAL, DESIGN, WHICH IS ABOUT IMAGES; YOU FINISH THE DESIGN, AND IT'S OUT OF YOUR HANDS, A FINISHED PRODUCT—ESPECIALLY IN JAPAN, WHERE THERE ARE NO COLOR PROOFS. WITH PRODUCT DESIGN, IT TAKES ONE OR TWO YEARS FROM CONCEPT TO FINISHED PRODUCT. SINCE 1988, IGARASHI HAS SPENT HALF HIS TIME "DESIGNING . . . AND MAKING . . . THINGS THAT, IN ADDITION TO A CERTAIN EMPHASIS ON IMAGE, ALSO HAVE AN ACTUAL FUNCTION: ELEMENTS FOR OUR ENVIRONMENT THAT REPRESENT GOOD DESIGN." □

*T*HE ONLY REASON JAPANESE CARS ARE SELLING
BETTER THAN AMERICAN CARS IN AMERICA IS THAT THEY
DON'T BREAK DOWN AND THEY DON'T USE MUCH GAS.
IT'S NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE WELL DESIGNED."

The shift in focus from image to object has been gradual and intuitive; his interest in function evolved from projects that were originally graphic design problems. Responsible for the cover of an interior design magazine for the past decade, he "inevitably had to consider what makes a good object, or product; I developed a deep interest in *things*." In addition, the corporate identity work he's done since 1974 for such clients as Mitsui Bank, Suntory, Meiji Milk, and dozens of smaller companies led Igarashi to conclude what the consumer will also eventually conclude: "No matter how good the image is, it's meaningless if the objects that the company sells are no good." □ Having made this discovery, Igarashi has entered the realm of social responsibility and what he defines as meaningful product design. With the establishment of a design,

manufacturing, import and sales venture called Y.M.D. and sponsorship from the Yamada Shomei Lighting Company Ltd., he has become something of a savior to a class of manufacturers that mass production techniques seemed destined to destroy—the local, small-scale factory.

□ His voice drops with respect when he relates how Y.M.D. came about: "Mr. Yamada came to hear one of my lectures and apparently he knew my design and liked it. He approached me and asked, 'Would you consider working with us for the next 30 years?' I had never been asked such a question. I accepted." As the company's consultant, the first project Igarashi proposed was what is now Y.M.D. Established in 1989, Y.M.D. is an interior design firm that embodies the values Igarashi holds as a craftsman and the experience he has gained as an internationally active designer/businessman. In contrast to mass production's vicious cycle—high investment in high-tech factories and low profit margins necessitated by short product lifecycles—the system at Y.M.D. promotes small and mid-sized runs of beautifully designed and crafted products. □ The motivation behind Y.M.D. is complex and reflects the concerns of the times: quality and pollution. Igarashi is anxious not only about the plight of traditional, local manufacturers forced out of business and consumers offered nothing but products of mediocre design. He is fearful for designers themselves. "The current system has a bad effect on design; in

order to make something that costs \$10 in Japan sell for \$80 in the U.S., you have to make not 10, but 100; not in wood, but in plastic, not in Japan, but in Southeast Asia." The people who make the products Igarashi designs and Y.M.D. sells (through its own distribution system) are "small manufacturers in rural Japan with 500 years of history, like cast iron and cast bronze foundries." Non-polluting and highly specialized (one manufacturer produces kettles for the tea ceremony), these industries have problems Igarashi wants to solve: "They have no budget to develop new products, no information network to tell them what the international market wants, no contacts in the design world." He looks to Italy's support of small factories as a model. □ Causing them even more anguish is the fact that the next generation doesn't want to

take over. As Igarashi puts it, "There is no next generation. All over Japan, small manufacturers are disappearing. To these places, I say, 'Forget the design fee. I'll design the product. If you want to make it, I'll

introduce you to the place that can sell it. If and when it comes on the market, then I'll take a royalty." □ Small runs of a large variety of products give, Igarashi reminds us, "what everyone wants—special things of their own." Igarashi dreams of the day when an international information network will exist, through which those who want these special things can communicate with those who make them. "This is the computer age; this should be possible." □ Igarashi was the first Tokyo designer in 20 years to visit one of Y.M.D.'s current partners, the cast iron works Yamasho Chuzo Co., Ltd. "They were thrilled to see me. They put everything into making a superior product. For a designer, this is a prime experience. Of course, we all need money, but to design for people who appreciate my work and put their all into its creation is what I really want to do." □ The imports Igarashi chooses for Y.M.D.—Eileen Gray furniture, Emform desk accessories, Monumental Miniatures stone architectural models—reflect the character of the designer, something he contends is sorely missing in Japanese products. Raised in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, educated at Tokyo's Tama University of Fine Arts and UCLA, and running offices in Tokyo and L.A., Igarashi is a pris-



(ABOVE AND OPPOSITE PAGE) THE SUNTORY CORPORATE LOGO IS DERIVED FROM THE CHINESE CHARACTER "HIBIKI," WHOSE MEANING REPRESENTS THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SUNTORY FOOD AND BEVERAGE COMPANY LTD. DATE: 1990

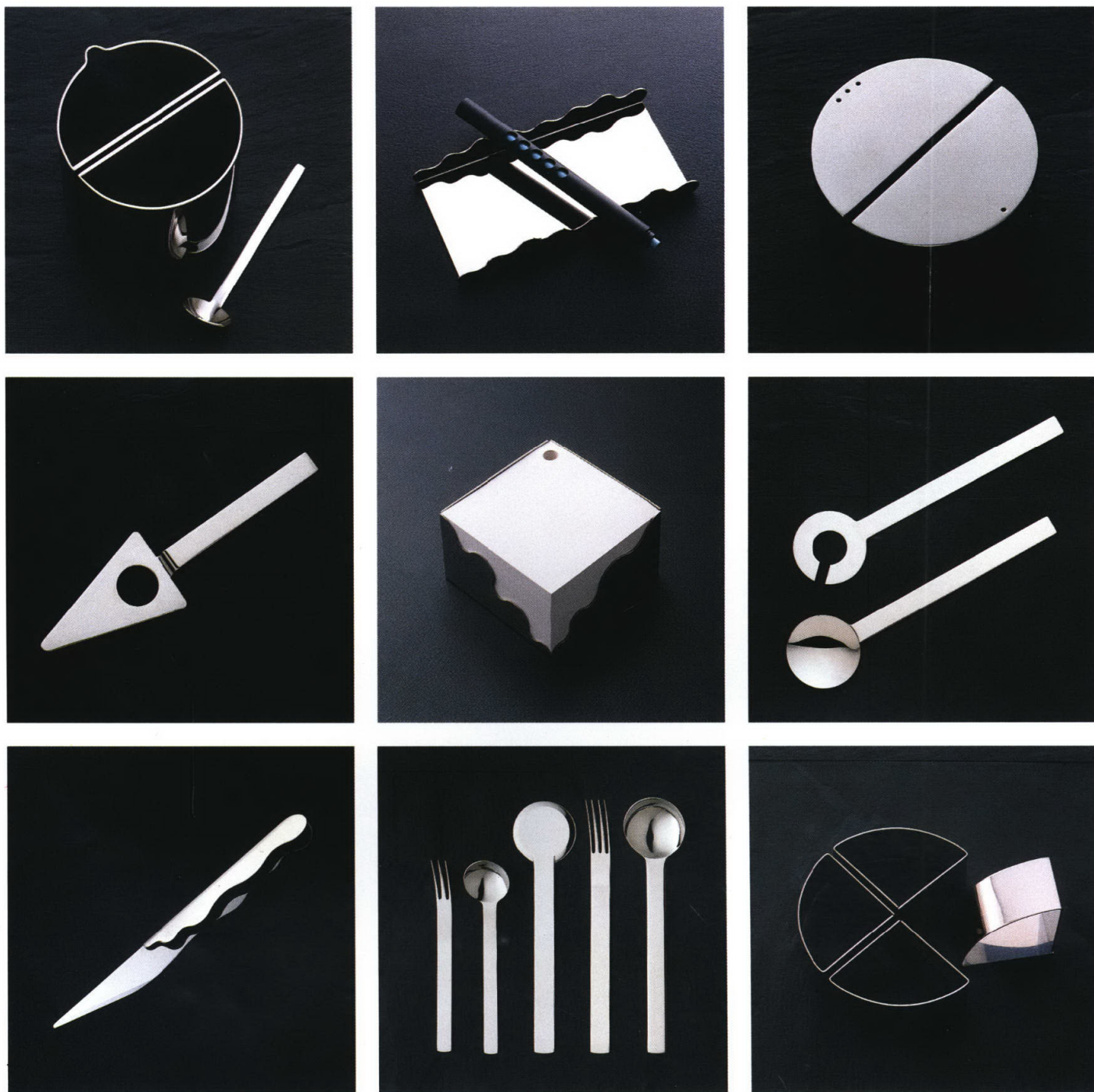




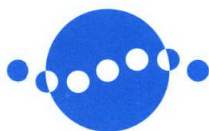
(ABOVE) THE 1989 LIVING OBJECTS EXHIBITION AT THE YURAKUCHO SEIBU DEPARTMENT STORE. ■ (OPPOSITE, TOP) THE POSTER FOR THE LIVING OBJECTS EXHIBITION OF MODERN OBJECTS AND PRODUCTS INSPIRED BY TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ESTHETIC. ■ (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) A SERIES OF PACKAGE DESIGNS FOR YAMADA SHOMEI LIGHTING CO., Y.M.D. DIVISION STAINLESS STEEL PRODUCTS

oner of neither culture. In fact, despite his quiet manner, he harbors some serious criticism of the system Japanese business has created for product designers. □ Igarashi says it's an old problem, an entrenched system; obsessed with catching up with the West, postwar Japanese companies went for the huge U.S. mass market with average products, hired product designers into the corporate system, and consequently stifled the possibility of superior design. "And it is still so today, most industrial designers work within the confines of Japanese industry. Matsushita alone employs 500 or 600 designers. To produce a large number of products in a short period of time, with a minimum investment in design, this is the best system. But it won't produce star designers." □ He presents a perfect example: "Everybody knows the Sony Walkman. Everybody knows Sony. But does anybody know who designed the Walkman?" □ Furthermore, does anybody care? "The Walkman is a great invention," admits Igarashi, "but it's not good design. I wouldn't expect to see it in a design museum in 100 years time." Adding that the Walkman logo, representing the state of graphic design in Japan, is "hideous," Igarashi makes a novel suggestion: improve trade relations between Japan and the West by improving Japanese product design. Improve design by giving designers freedom and encouragement, making the effort to sell well-designed products for long periods in order to gradually build up a stock of good design-products that eventually will be

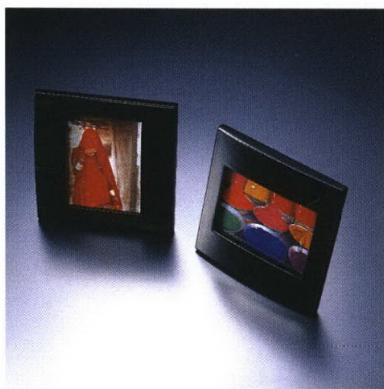
referred to as classics. □ "If you divide design into flow design and stock design, Japan is all flow design: there is too little building upon previous work to improve the quality of the whole lot. Design is simply consumed. □ "The only reason Japanese cars are selling better than American cars in America is that they don't break down and they don't use much gas. It's not because they're well designed. They're poorly designed. In fact, it is because they're poorly designed, because Japanese product design has not yet reached the level yet where you can call it culture, that people are complaining about how many there are. Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen can sell as many cars as they want, and nobody complains. There are other reasons of course, but the impression is that European cars are accepted because they have character, originality. The Lexus is O.K. but it's a copy of a Benz." Igarashi, who is considered arrogant among Japanese industrial designers for insisting (in a typically Western manner) that he be credited for the products he designs, recommends that Japanese business slow down the production cycle and lower product development costs by nurturing "five superior designers" in Japan, and giving them the important projects that foreign designers get now. Putting his reasoning succinctly, he points out that "no matter how many design centers Japanese industry establishes in the U.S. and Europe, Japanese designers aren't going to improve. Japanese designers are sheep. We need wolves." ■



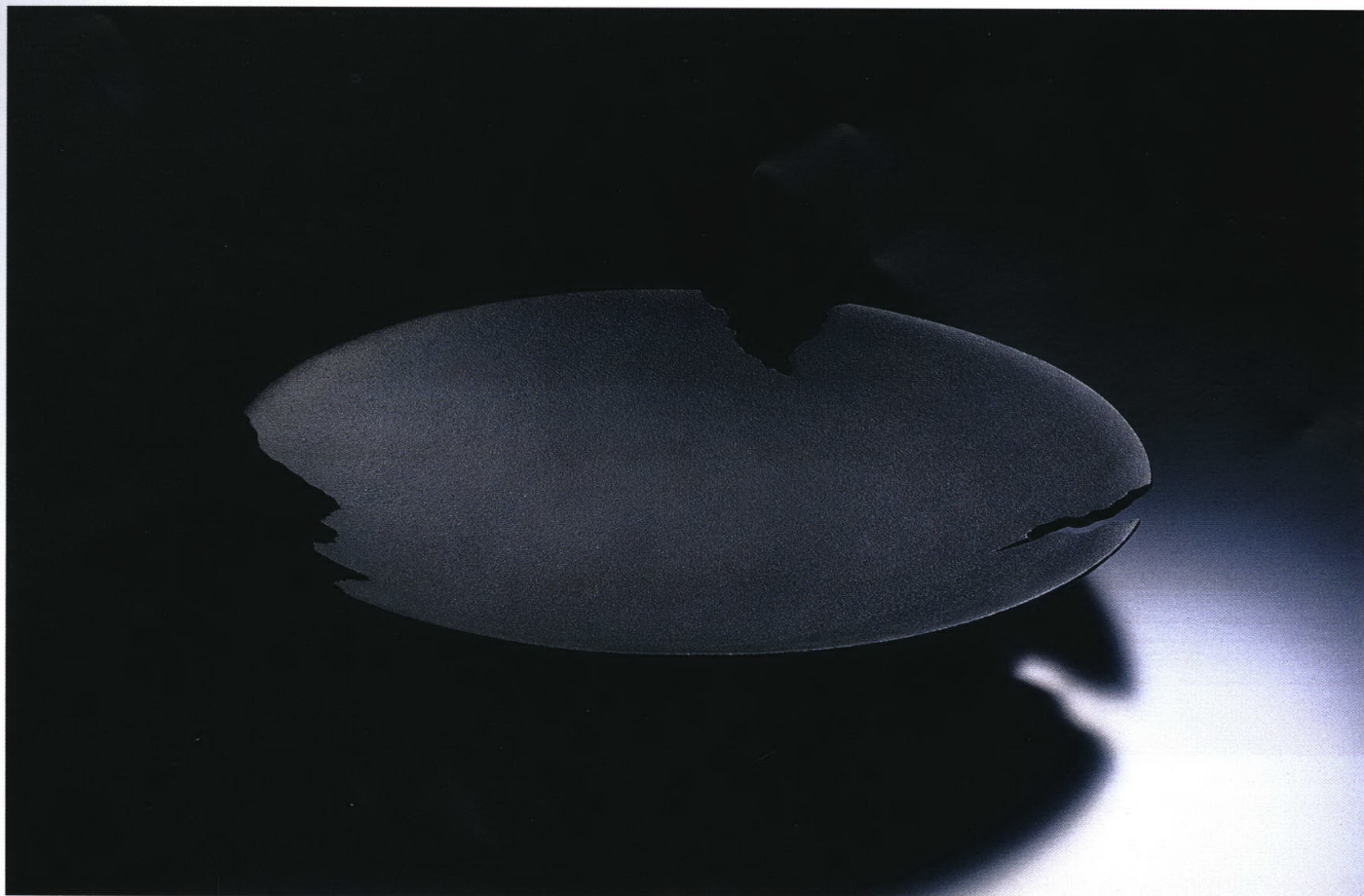
(ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT IN DESCENDING ORDER) TITLE: Y.M.D. STAINLESS CLIENT: YAMADA SHOMEI LIGHTING CO., LTD., Y.M.D. DIVISION DESCRIPTION: MILK AND SUGAR SERVER WITH SUGAR SPOON DATE: 1989 ■ DESCRIPTION: LARGE PAPER TRAY DATE: 1990 ■ DESCRIPTION: SALT AND PEPPER SHAKER DATE: 1989 ■ DESCRIPTION: CAKE SERVER DATE: 1989 ■ DESCRIPTION: MEMO PAD WITH PAPER DATE: 1989 ■ DESCRIPTION: SALAD SERVER SET DATE: 1989 ■ TITLE: LETTER OPENER DATE: 1989 ■ DESCRIPTION: FLATWARE DATE: 1989 ■ DESCRIPTION: NAPKIN RINGS MATERIALS: STAINLESS STEEL DATE: 1989 ■ (BOTTOM) TITLE: CALPIS CORPORATE LOGO DESCRIPTION: FOOD AND BEVERAGE COMPANY CLIENT: THE CALPIS FOOD INDUSTRY CO., LTD. DATE: 1983 ■ (OPPOSITE) TITLE: HYVÄLYSTI GARDEN KIT DESIGN: TAKENOBU IGARASHI CLIENT: KAI INTERNATIONAL CO., LTD. DATE: 1988 PHOTOS: MASARU MERA ■



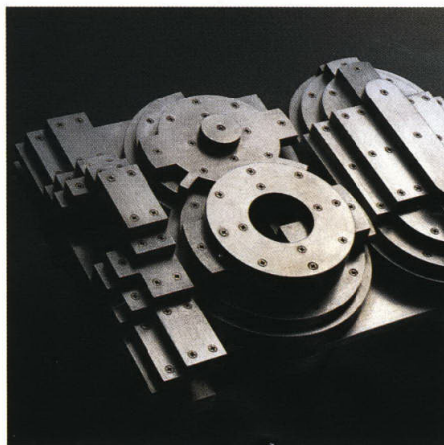
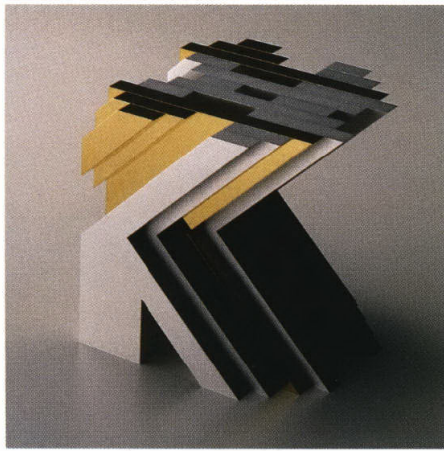
(OPPOSITE PAGE) THE FISSO STATIONERY SET OF ABS RESIN AND OTHER MATERIALS WAS DESIGNED FOR FUJII & CO., LTD BY TAKENOBU IGARASHI IN 1988 ■ (THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM) DESCRIPTION: THE



URUSHI CLOCK DATE: 1990 ■ DESCRIPTION: THE URUSHI SQUARE PHOTO STAND DATE: 1990 ■ DESCRIPTION: THE URUSHI FLOWER VASE DATE: 1990 ■ DESCRIPTION: THE URUSHI ROUND PHOTO STAND DATE: 1990 ■



(TOP) TITLE: Y.M.D. IMONO PLATTER MATERIAL: CAST IRON MANUFACTURER: YAMASHO CHUZO CO., LTD. CLIENT: YAMADA SHOMEI LIGHT-
ING CO., LTD., Y.M.D. DIVISION DATE: 1989 ■ (ABOVE, LEFT) DESCRIPTION: IMONO PLATTER CIRCLE DATE: 1989 ■ (ABOVE CENTER)
DESCRIPTION: IMONO PLATTER LARGE HOLES DATE: 1989 ■ (ABOVE RIGHT) DESCRIPTION: IMONO PLATTER DOTS DATE: 1990 ■



(OPPOSITE) IMONO DESK LIGHT (SPIRAL) CLIENT: YAMADA SHOMEI LIGHTING CO., LTD., Y.M.D. DIVISION MANUFACTURER: YAMASHO CHUZO CO., LTD. MATERIAL: CAST IRON (BASE) AND WASHI (SHADE) PHOTO: MASARU MERA ■ (TOP LEFT) NISSAN INFINITI SCULPTURE DATE: 1989/1990 ■ (TOP RIGHT) KOKUYO "K" SCULPTURE DATE: 1988 ■ (BOTTOM LEFT) DESCRIPTION: KAJIMA CORPORATION 150TH ANNIVERSARY PUBLICATION COVER DATE: 1988 ■ (BOTTOM RIGHT) 180 DESIGN: TAKENOBU IGARASHI CLIENT: NIKE MATERIAL: ALUMINUM PHOTO: MITSUMASA FUJITSUKA ■ (BELOW) IMONO (CAST IRON) BENCH DATE: 1989 ■

