Kazumasa Nagai
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Kazumasa Nagai's: Wilderness

For 40 years the Japanese graphic master has harnessed a ferocious inner tension that's created a mysterious body of work many find difficult to categorize. Design or fine art? Both or neither?

By Maggie Kinser Saiki

(Previous spread)
Kazumasa Nagai
Portrait by Koji Yasukochi

As a teenager Kazumasa Nagai was deserted by the comfort that should have been his birthright. He was born in 1929, the eldest son of a top executive of one of Japan's largest textile firms. But privation superseded privilege when his father, who during the war had been appointed to a similar post in a Manchurian textiles corporation, disappeared in the chaos of Japan's defeat. The family's home burned in the firebombing of Osaka. The young Nagai, only in junior high school, left home to work. He started by hauling baggage in a railway station in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. The vast territory was just being settled, and Nagai took it into his head to clear some land for himself in the backcountry. Thus began the self-imposed dichotomy of Kazumasa Nagai's life.

Nagai was not a robust youth born for the backbreaking physical labor of digging up tree stumps. He was shocked into recognizing darkness, and true fear, by his entire Hokkaido experience, but particularly by 24 hours he spent wandering lost through a primeval forest into which he'd ventured alone. Today he remembers that night as if it were a nightmare from which he'd just awoken. "It was pitch black," he says. "And there I was facing the vastness of the world, the depth, the true terror, the limitlessness of space. I realized that each of us is totally alone in the world and that in space each of us is weak and afraid." Some time later, Nagai's father reappeared and the boy went back to the city and to school, but he had tasted the wilderness.

When you meet Kazumasa Nagai, in the ordered cool of his office at the Nippon Design Center in Tokyo's Ginza, you wonder how he ever could have been attracted to the wilderness of Hokkaido. He is just as he has been described at 50, 30, and 20: elegant, a finished package, in control. But when you see his work, and hear contemporaries describe his naïvete, his spiritual isolation, his outer calm, and then meet the man, you realize that he has trapped his wilderness within himself. And he has found a way to express it. What I assumed was elegance in the Kazumasa Nagai I met was actually tension, contained.

Every issue surrounding Kazumasa Nagai is bound in contradiction. Is his work abstract or concrete? Is he an artist or a designer? Is he uncommonly flexible or incapable of change? In his life and work, Nagai dares us to pin him down. When he was a teenager, growing up in the merchant city of Osaka, his first dream was to conquer the unknown. That proved not only unsuitable to his constitution, but contrary to the wisdom of those bleak times. He managed to emerge from the depths of his fears and then recreate them—on pieces of paper—over and over again. His work can't help but mirror the duality of his spirit.

Throughout his life, Nagai has aligned himself against fate and circumstances. He studied sculpture at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, but found himself attracted to design. His request to transfer to the department was denied by his professor. On a leave of absence to revitalize his spirit, he was offered a job for which he had no training: head of advertising for his father's firm in Osaka. Uneducated in even the basics, Nagai nevertheless went on to perform the job admirably, to meet the top designers of the day and to become one of them. Ikko Tanaka, Tsunehisa Kimura, Toshihiro Katayama and Nagai soon became inseparable. They called themselves "The A Club" and met in Nagai's tiny rented room in Osaka.

In 1960, the 31-year-old Nagai participated in the founding of the Nippon Design Center, an organization of creators determined to lead Japanese industry into the age of expansion with design as a priority. Against all expectations, the young Nagai won the competition for designing the group's logo. He is the only one of the original founders who did not go independent. Instead, he helped make the NDC a safe forest in which he and others like him—"people who don't naturally fit into groups," he explained—could explore their own potential. The structure of the NDC allows the most talented designers among the 150 employees to head "research laboratories" in which they can both respond to clients' needs and pursue independent projects. By going to the NDC rather than an ad agency, a corporation can theoretically work directly with the designers and count on their full participation in the campaign, as well as the informal participation of any number of staff creators. In a dichotomy typical for Nagai, he is both at the center of a crowd and utterly alone.

Ikko Tanaka recalled "The A Club"'s idealistic, raucous gatherings, where Nagai most often participated in silent amusement. But, Tanaka wrote, "once something they said set a spark to something inside of him, he would be transformed into a completely different person, erupting a stream of garrulity like a dam bursting and releasing a torrent of raging water." Often described as "naïve," Nagai still responds to the world with a powerful effluence—but turns it inward, producing a likeness of his inner wilderness, in all of its complexity and tension. Tanaka describes Nagai's approach as a knowing escape into "a secret room, leaving behind what is only the most direct point of contact for design." In other words, he only comes out of his private meditation when and where he must to stay vital as a designer.

For the first 20 years of his career, Nagai worked with a compass and rule producing mainly corporate image posters, posters for cultural events, magazine and book covers, and logos. His work from this period is often described as abstract, but as Tanaka has written, these pieces "are scattered with motifs that are quite concrete. They feel abstract because in Kazumasa Nagai's pictures, there is not a trace of humanity." I was put off by not only the cool character of his early work, but by its insistence that the viewer succumb to the cold.

But Nagai's concern with line and his stubborn exploration of illusion and space were appropriate for the clients who chose him. And while he refused to use direct representations of product, with few exceptions, he managed to make these spatial forays personal journeys, into which the viewer was not merely invited, but lured and then trapped for a time. In a technique he used often, from as early as the late 1960s through the late 1980s, he reproduced his inner expanse by contrasting photographs of deserts, clouded blue skies and vast bodies of water with uncompromising patterns of his own making. It didn't matter if the client was a printing company (Adonis), a wallpaper manufacturer (Kawakichi) or the *Asahi* newspaper's "Let Global Greenery Grow" campaign, Nagai was on his own trip.

"When things become just what they are, the world narrows," Nagai says, in a clear reference to what he sees as a general decline of art and culture in advertising and other graphic design. The recession has sent Japanese enterprises running for their accountants and market researchers, and the creator today is given very little leeway.

In the mid-'80s he switched to animals as his primary motif, and the event was discussed as if Nagai were a fine artist who had made an extraordinary departure in style. "I began to feel I was imitating myself," he says. "Once you become famous for a certain level of work, you want to maintain it. But if you don't change, the work will become less and less powerful than the work you did in your prime."

The lines of an early Nagai poster often utilize illusion, but Nagai does not like or use illusion for illusion's sake. He told me that the bizarre world he is trying to create is not as specific as Escher's. "I am trying to symbolize a more chaotic strangeness," he says. "If I could, I would have people on the outside feel what I see on the inside."

In Japan, where design grew up as a poor cousin to fine art, this attempt to share an inner space with those of us on the outside is called a designer's responsibility. Nagai is a consummately conscientious individual and considers his job poorly done, as art critic Masataka Ogawa has written, "unless it proceeds to a more profound link with the expression of the designer's total personality."

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"In the US, in France and in England, there are quite a number of interesting commercials," Nagai says. "Take Nike. They're not just selling shoes. The concept is the wonder of sports. If the subject is sports, something quite daring can be done. Something appropriate to the company's brand, and yet universal. Advertising here has taken a sharp step down. The internationally recognized work of Japanese graphic designers remains the poster. The poster is safe. For now."

Although Nagai's whole being reacts as if allergic to straight advertising, and Ikko Tanaka has said outright that Nagai has abandoned the field of design, this very thin tightrope between design and art is one Nagai has walked beautifully for at least 40 years. His logos—simple, specific and successful—prove that his posters are deliberately dense and complex. Both logos and posters capably mirror his inner tension but they are not an artist's work, undertaken as a means of individual expression. Each has a client and a social context. Before he started doing his animal posters, Nagai used prints to explore new visual ideas. A short tour through the print, silkscreen, sculptural work and pure fine art illustrates the difference between his art and his design. The former is purely personal and the latter has found a way to involve us—the public—in the exploration of his inner space.

At the top of the NDC, Nagai is in a uniquely comfortable position from which to mourn the loss of culture and art in advertising, without having to resign himself to the consequences. This is particularly true because he has concentrated on the medium of the poster, traditionally more art-oriented than other graphic design. Nagai is working both sides of the street—by shunning commercialism, he has managed to corner the market on non-commercial work. In the mid-1980s he switched to animals as his primary motif, and the event was discussed as if Nagai were a fine artist who had made an extraordinary departure in style. But Nagai is no artist. He made a rational, conscious decision to maintain his stature. "I began to feel I was imitating myself to some extent," he says. "Once you become famous for a certain level of work, you want to maintain it. But if you don't change it, the work will become less and less powerful than the work you did in your prime. Designers have to live in the present, to 'breathe' the era, whether they're young or old." He analyzed his work up until that point—drawing non-organic subjects with a ruler and compass—and elected the opposite extreme: drawing organic subjects by hand. He ventured into unknown territory in order to test himself and his ability to hold the attention of the audience. "It was a risk," he says. "In the design world, my early work was recognized as 'The World of Kazumasa Nagai.' I may have succeeded or failed in doing something outside of this. The final word may have been 'Nagai used to do some really good work but now all he does are these queer things. He's finished.'"

This is the man who once thought he had lost his father and in response took off to Hokkaido, putting himself in terrible danger. At 60, he was comfortable in his fame, but risked it to stay on top. Today, at 70, he has reaffirmed his success with a growing number of *grand prix* awards around the world, something he is sure would not have happened had he stuck with the same old lines.

"The animal posters say that there is something akin to space in the heart of each human being," he says, "and if you plumb the depths of that space, you touch something like life. To represent this, I borrow the shapes of animals." Nagai describes this inner life force, symbolized by his beasts, as the overriding global concern of the day: our environment. So while the ostensible sponsors of these posters are museums and other exhibition venues, the message is so much grander. We, the viewers, might consider ourselves the client; this is image-advertising for enlightened humankind.

Nagai's work, making such great claims on us, is unsettling. It demands participation and it presents a world view that is far from light. There is danger and confrontation in his spacescapes, though it isn't human. There is unmeasured power and there are distances untraversed. The frame is a relief to the viewer but he knows that Nagai's world goes on and on. Nagai's beasts are more immediately approachable, but only immediately. They circle in rather than out and end up being at least as unnerving as his spacescapes. Look closely at these fantastic animals and you find they are often eating one another or procreating in an unpleasant way. And yet they are not insinuating that we made them that way. We must only acknowledge them.

In 1976, in a self-portrait in the Art Technique Now series, Nagai presented himself as a skewed square, although all the lines are in fact straight. Diagonal black lines running in opposite directions within and without a white border create the illusion. In the accompanying text, he confesses to being "clumsy at living" and "dishonest," because designers are supposed to be "aligned perfectly with society" and he is not. But for him, design is his only real hope. "If I were not able to relate to society through design," he wrote, "I'd likely be living under a bridge somewhere." Nagai's unique treasure is the ability to represent through graphic design the constant tension between what should be and what is. "If I wanted to show the white boundary as straight, I would have to lie," he writes. "The form would lose its inherent interest." And so would Nagai. ■

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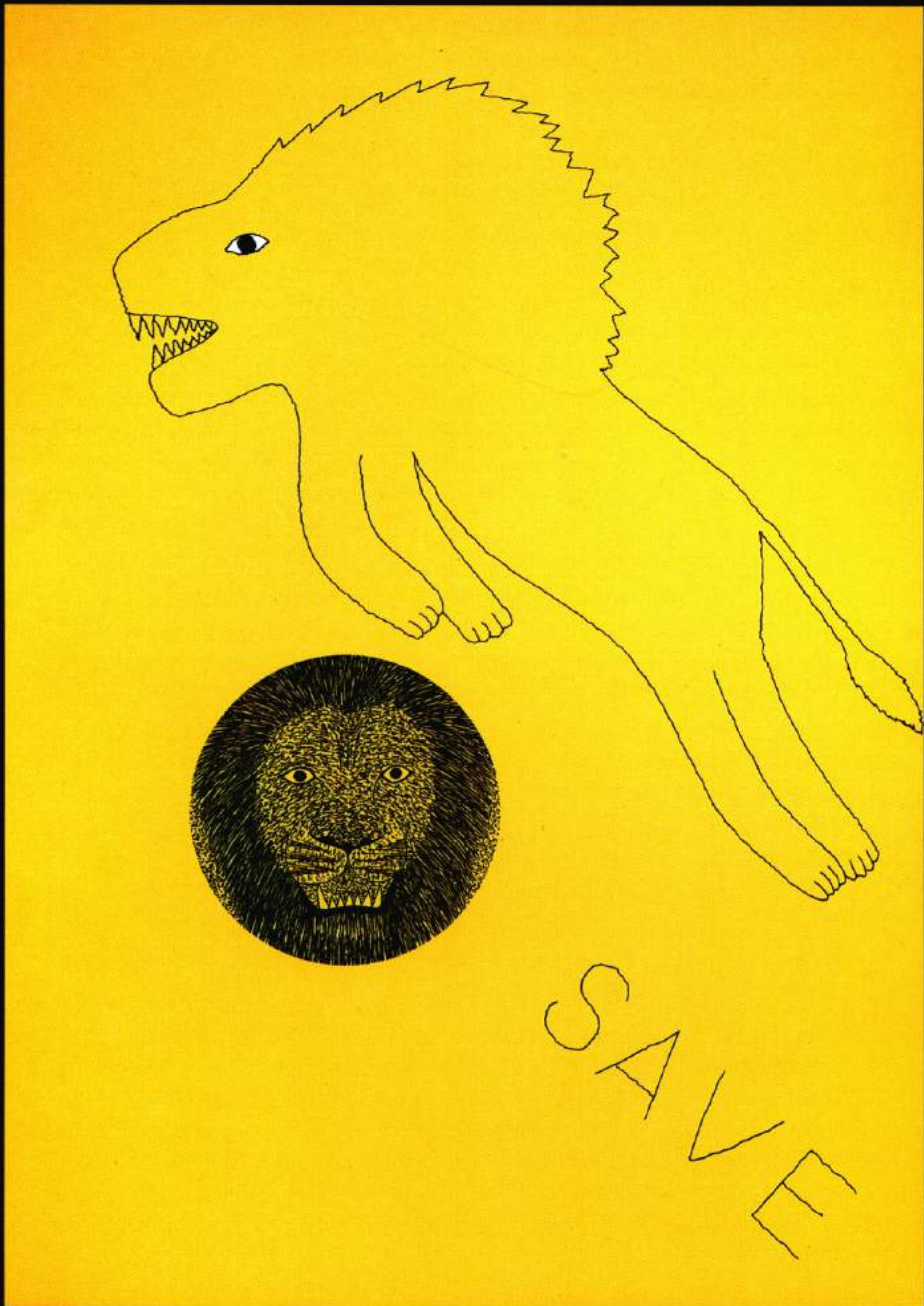
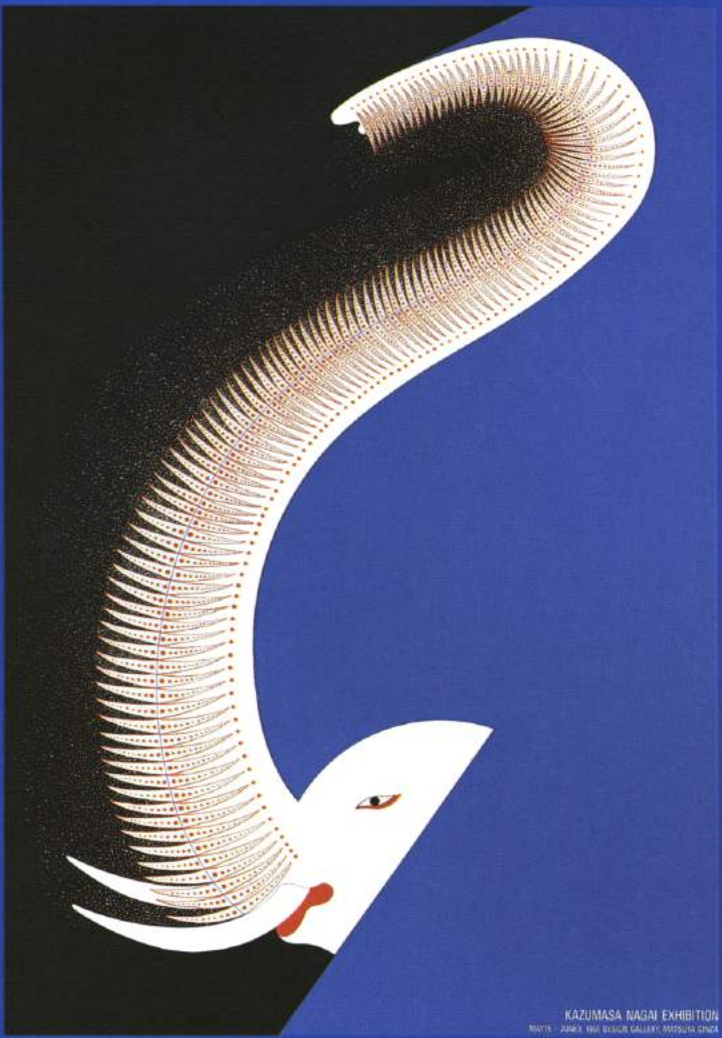
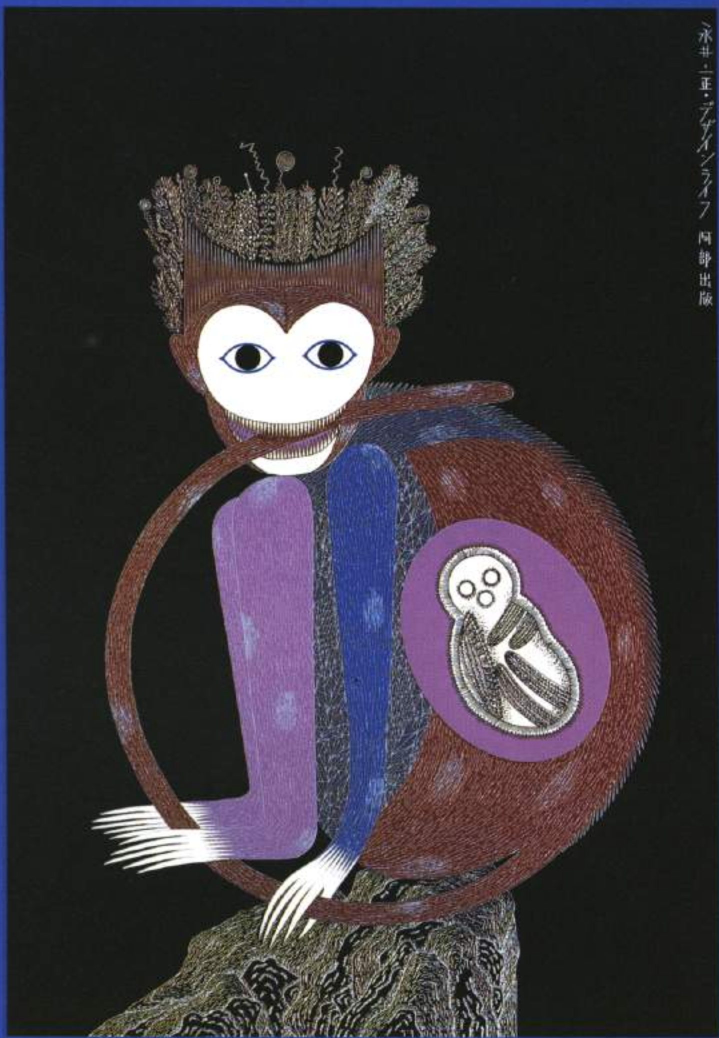
"SAVE." 1998



(Opposite page)
"SAVE." 1998; "SAVE." 1998;
"SAVE." 1997; "SAVE." 1997

(Opposite)
"I'M HERE," 1992
"Art of Toyama Biennial," 1990





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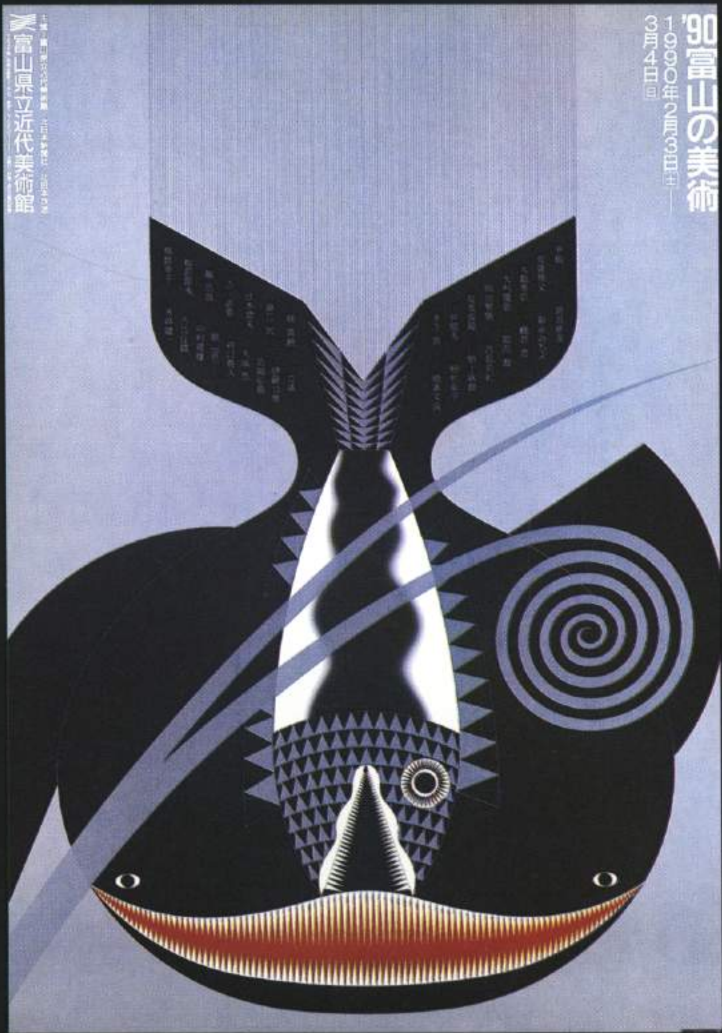
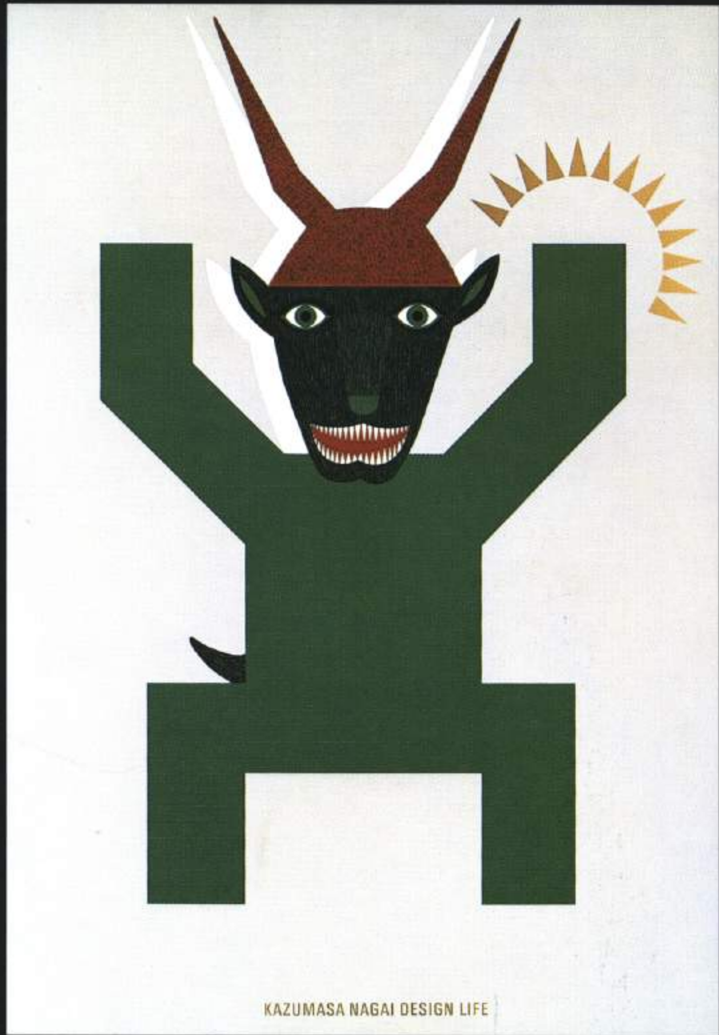
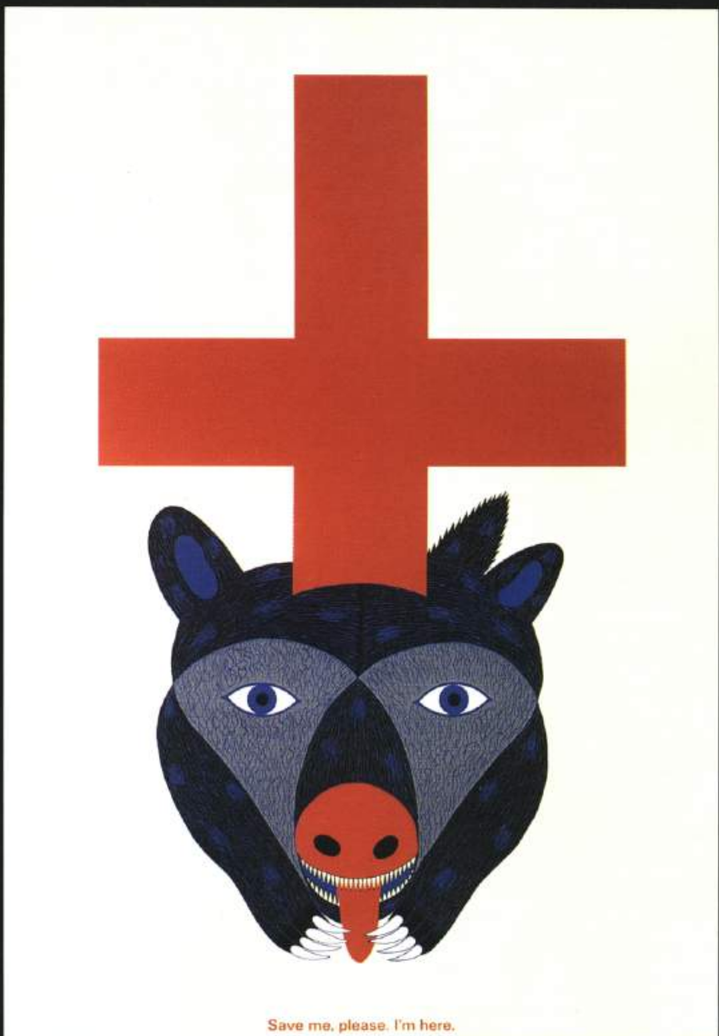
"KAZUMASA NAGAI EXHIBITION," 1991; "KAZUMASA NAGAI DESIGN LIFE," 1993


I'M HERE


'90富山の美術
1990年2月3日(土)—
3月4日(日)
富山県立近代美術館


LIFE TO SHARE


KAZUMASA NAGAI DESIGN LIFE


Save me, please. I'm here.


KAZUMASA NAGAI DESIGN LIFE