



Mitsuo Katsui: Channeling Ikizama By Maggie Kinser Saiki



Every designer relates to the tools of his trade, but Katsui pursues, studies and applies them until he achieves a "genuine dialogue" with each one. He is a master of all mediums and a pioneer in computer graphics, harnessing the capacity of technology to reveal the power of life.



Mitsuo Katsui is a rational man, extraordinarily discerning in matters of technology. If he were only that, his presumed title, “the emperor of computer graphics” might suit him. But it doesn’t. It confines him and banishes computers to some distant realm far from the rest of our visual experience. Katsui is intrigued by technology only insofar as it can further his expression of the Japanese notion of *ikizama*, or “life’s flow”—the daily commingling of the inspiring, the terrible, the fantastic and the beautiful. Because he has consistently chosen cool and rational tools to present a warm and pulsing truth, his work sparkles with friction, between medium and message, logic and beauty.

Mitsuo Katsui’s career began with a bachelor of the arts degree from the Department of Arts and Architectonics at the Tokyo University of Education (now Tsukuba University), but he immediately earned a postgraduate degree in the more rational fields of design and photography. The camera and the printing press were his first mechanical conquests, and he showed promise early on. He exhibited his photographs in a Tokyo gallery two years after graduating (and one year after he started working at Ajinomoto, a major food corporation). The following year he won his first award, from the Japan Advertising Artists’ Club—the first national organization of designers. Three years later, at the age of 30, Katsui began freelancing and ventured into the uncharted territories of new graphic technology, which he has explored ever since. In 1963, he convinced a large printing company to let him experiment with the GEOME, a new machine developed to print micron lines on paper money, previously drawn by hand. Katsui experimented extensively, and two years later produced an animated movie using the machine.

Adventurous in the direction of his career as well as in the particulars of his trade, Katsui participated in the famed *Persona Exhibition* of 1965, an international show whose roster turned out to be a Who’s Who of the Japanese design world. He also participated in the *Environment Exhibition* (1966), in which designers, architects, and other creators showed their new work. By the late 1960s, Katsui began to organize complex and technologically challenging projects. One of his first grand undertakings was the art direction of the three-volume Kodansha Encyclopedia, a six-year collaboration between 20 designers and five sub-directors. This project was iconic of Katsui’s

career, revealing the fountainhead of his talent, and he lived up to the challenge by producing the perfect combination of logic and passion.

In Edward Tufte’s landmark classic, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (1997), Tufte writes, “graphical competence demands three quite different skills: the substantive, statistical and artistic. Allowing artist-illustrators to control the design and content of statistical graphics is almost like allowing typographers to control the content, style and editing of prose.” The encyclopedia designers working with Katsui must have understood the tendency Tufte warns against; they learned their material from the experts and employed the computer in their artistic efforts.

Katsui and his team were the first to create charts with the computer, which in turn determined the layout of each page. In contrast to the primary color charts typically found in data graphics, Katsui devised a special 14-color chart, analyzing mix percentages for the screens; created one-, two-, and three-dimensional diagrams; chose both abstract and realistic forms of visual expression, including photographs; created charts to describe temporal and physical relationships, methods of production, chemical compositions and other data.

An encyclopedia presents information that can be pinned down by the mind, unquestioned, and so it is the one place where you can find the limits of completely rational design. During these years, by the very parameters of the project, Katsui and his team were forced to design without recourse to such extraneous visual elements as decoration and artistic illustration. Particularly in Japanese design, decorative components prove to be escape routes through which logic abandons the project. Katsui recalls how the ascetic experience revealed “the appeal of visual representation of information, methods of expression richer than words.”

The most surprising thing about this elaborate encyclopedia is not its clarity, which is superb, but its beauty. Katsui says that the overall beauty emanates from “knowledge and empathy.” To visually represent the facts and relations of objects, men, and history is not merely book design, but, as Katsui puts it, a matter of “democratizing the findings of scientists.” In other words, the designer creates a bond between layman and scientists. That bond is *ikizama*, the common ground. A solution such as Katsui’s encyclopedia, designed with both empathy and logic, makes evident the analytical competence of this designer’s mind.

Over the years, in several other prominent projects, Katsui continued to explore the line between logic, represented by technology, and beauty. He directed the government pavilion *Orgorama* at EXPO '70 in Osaka, in which he installed an exhibition of 120 video screens, and art directed *The World's Biggest Picture Book*, whose pages turned automatically, accompanied by music on cue. He art directed the *Kodansha Pavilion Brain House* at EXPO '85, and participated in *APE CALL from TOKYO*, a pioneering virtual exhibition in Japan and in the US during the early '90s.

Accustomed to directing talents and taking leadership throughout his career, Katsui has developed a public disposition that is generous and accommodating. He frequently judges national and international competitions, and as an educator, he is recognized as a quiet, thoughtful and benevolent presence. Until a few years ago, he taught design at his alma mater and continues to teach at the prestigious Musashino Art University. He also serves as an advisor, workshop leader and speaker at the International Design Center Nagoya.

Katsui's comprehensive understanding, subdued ego and logical approach to complex problems are perfectly suited to book design. He describes poster design as a blatant expression of a single point—which is, more often than not, the designer's. But the design of art books demands that the designer "work within a stranger's mind and a stranger's organization, and with the achievements of a stranger."

This world view is not to be reached by logic alone, however, and in these "strangers" projects, Katsui says he follows a Japanese tendency to go with the flow, demanding no master plan. His book design recreates the excitement of ephemeral sensations, and at the same time is duly reverential of the works presented: the woodcarvings of Denchu Shirakushi, a genius who worked until his death at the age of 93; the sculptures of Kyoko Asakura; the photographs of Ikko Narahara; and the handmade fishing flies of Kenichiro Sawada, used by fishermen around the world. Precious like a jewelry box, this last book was conceived when the craftsman brought Katsui a single, beautiful example of his work. Some of his creations, created from the feathers of birds now endangered, would never be made again. To preserve them and the craft, Katsui says, "I wanted to produce a book that true enthusiasts would treasure."

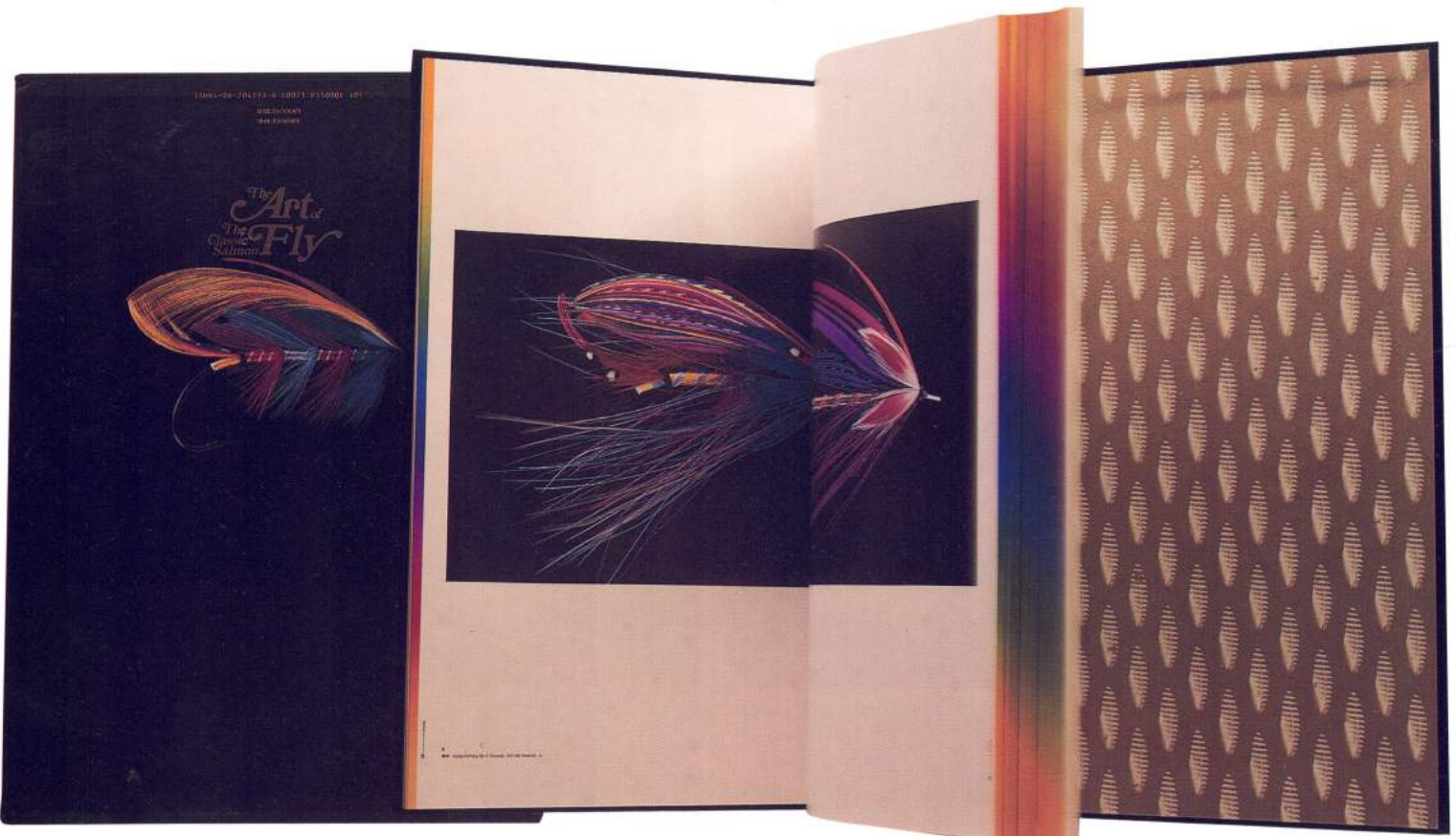
Katsui has even endeavored to make enthusiasts out of negligent bystanders. He wanted to design a catalog of Kyoko Asakura's scul-

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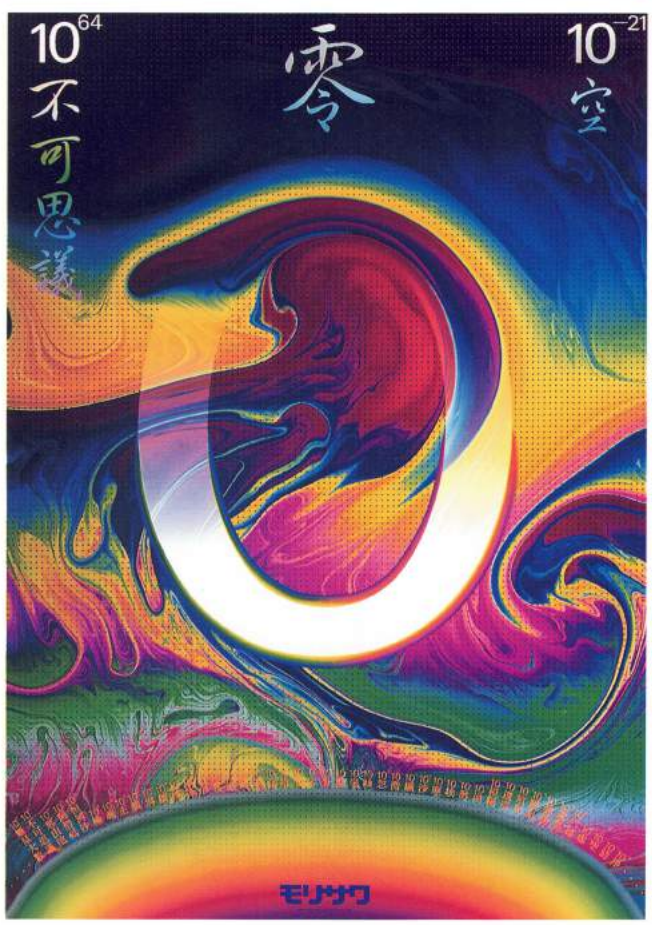
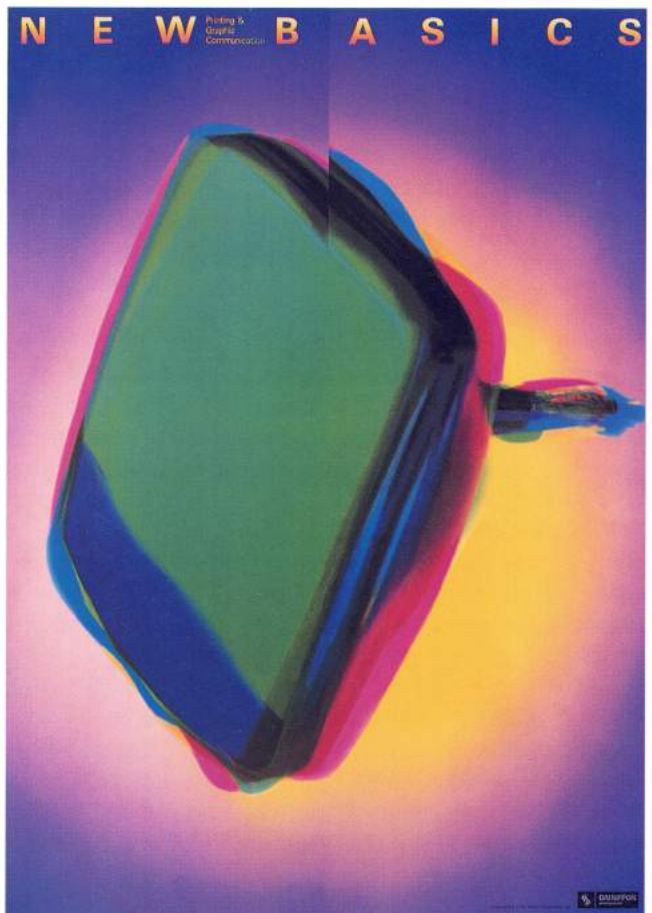
Poster design is Katsui's one true liberty and he has won numerous awards for it. It is in these single-frame statements that one senses Katsui's vibrant vision, emancipated from concerns about collaborators, colleagues and creator-clients. It is here that one can almost encounter the boy Katsui was, growing up in the 1930s in the Nihonbashi district of Tokyo, a center-city port on a branch of the Sumida River, absorbing the sensory vigor, and trying to comprehend and decode the underlying logic of the merchant culture. In his neighborhood was the main branch of the gorgeous Mitsukoshi Department Store, and the surrounding streets pulsed with commerce. Boats loaded with fabrics and foodstuffs docked and departed streetside; trade was quick at the tailors and the sushi shops. Katsui's view was permanently colored by this cosmopolitan aesthetic that rippled with life; this is *ikizama*, and this is a Katsui poster.

Katsui's recent work, such as *Circus* and *Gene* (page 30-31), features spectral light, often in motion, generated digitally and yet magnificently expressing the natural world—revealing the dichotomy of Katsui and of mankind in general. We are fascinated with the far limits of both rational thought and sensory ecstasy. In Katsui's latest fusions, both are present. Logic is represented by the medium and the complex geometric motifs; animate beauty is represented by the twisting changeable forms recalling all things natural, from seashells to DNA. Why has Katsui chosen this particular image with which to work his "technowizardry?" "In endless movement," Katsui says, "the microcosmic world shows us the beauty of life itself." ■

(Opening spread, left) *Global Brain "6th Sept. '96"* • Creative Director & Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Computer graphic operation: Toppan Printing Co., Ltd. • (Opening spread, right) *Bridging the Gap, 1998* • Creative Director & Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Computer graphic operation: Toppan Printing Co., Ltd. • Client: 12th World Aids Conference • (Opposite, top) *Portrait of Mitsuo Katsui by Toshio Enomoto* • (Below) *Classic Salmon Fly, By Ken Sawada, 1990* Creative Director & Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Client: Kodansha Publishing Co., Ltd. • Photo by: Iwana Akizuki



Top, left) New Basics; 1985 • Creative Director & Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Photographer: Hiroshi Hirashi • Client: Japan Industrial Design Association • (Bottom, left) Tradition et Nouvelles Techniques; 1985 • Creative Director & Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Photographer: Kari E. Deckart • Client: Morisawa & Company, Ltd. Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Photographer: Kari E. Deckart • Client: Morisawa & Company, Ltd.



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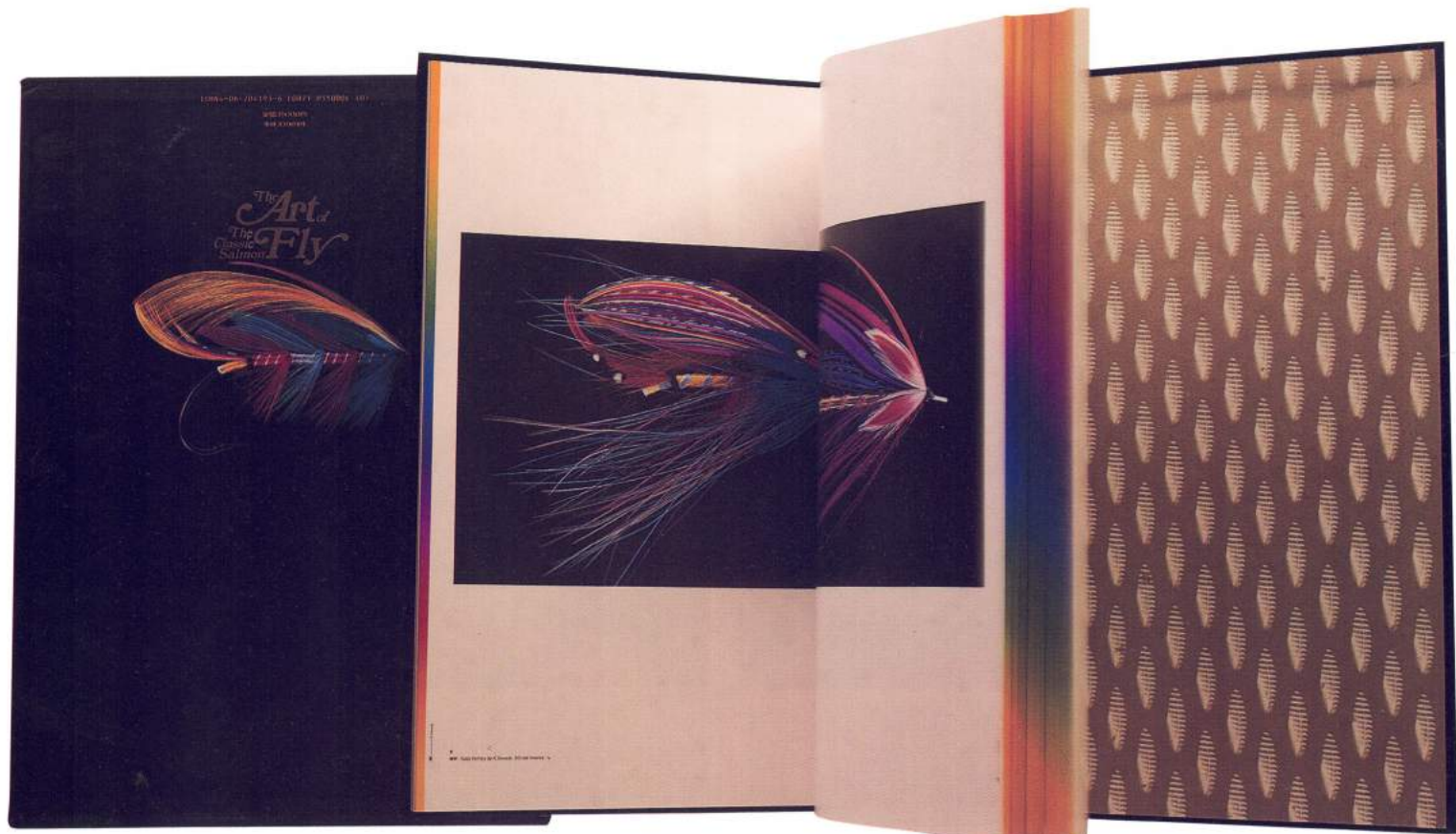
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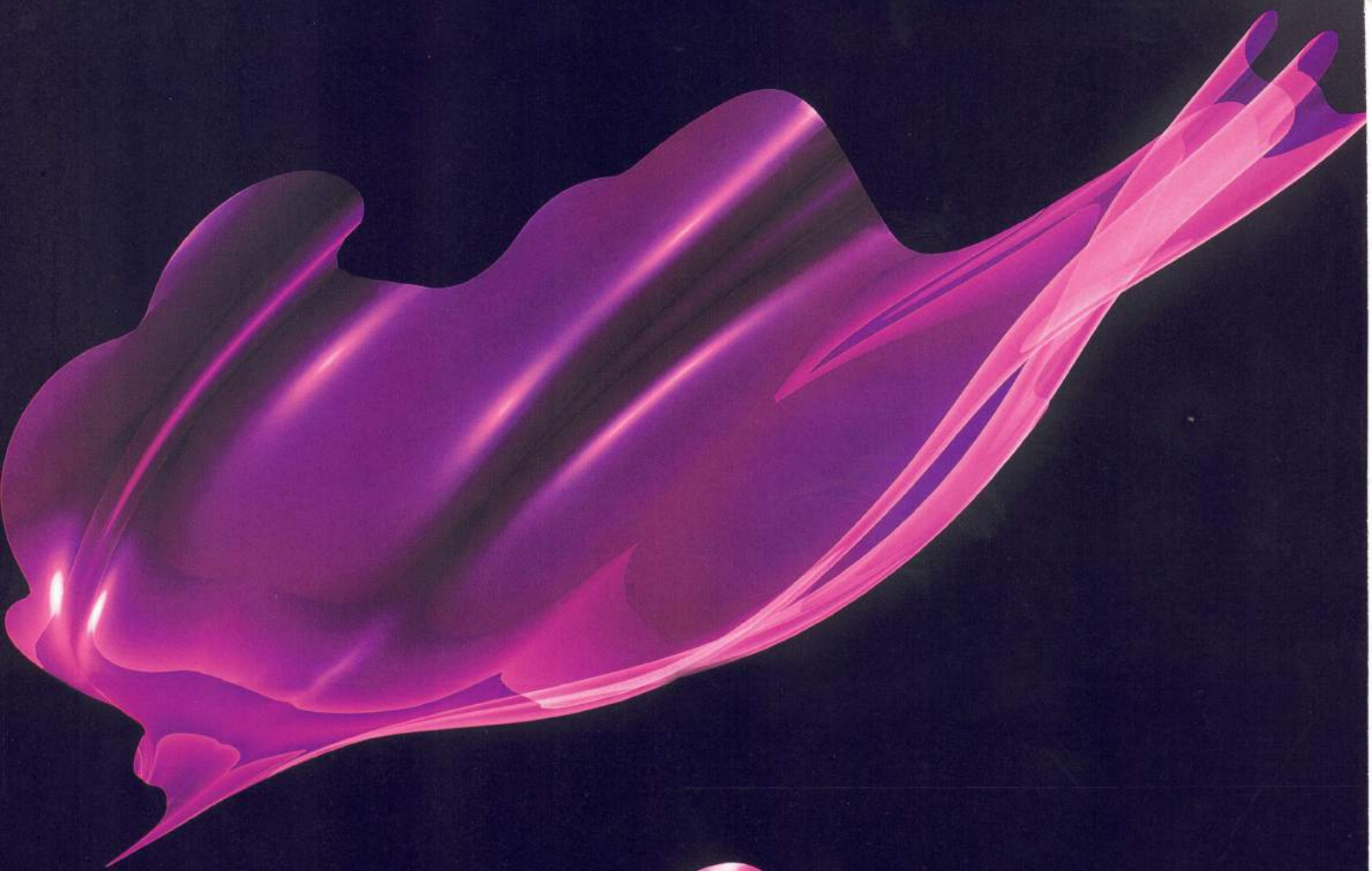
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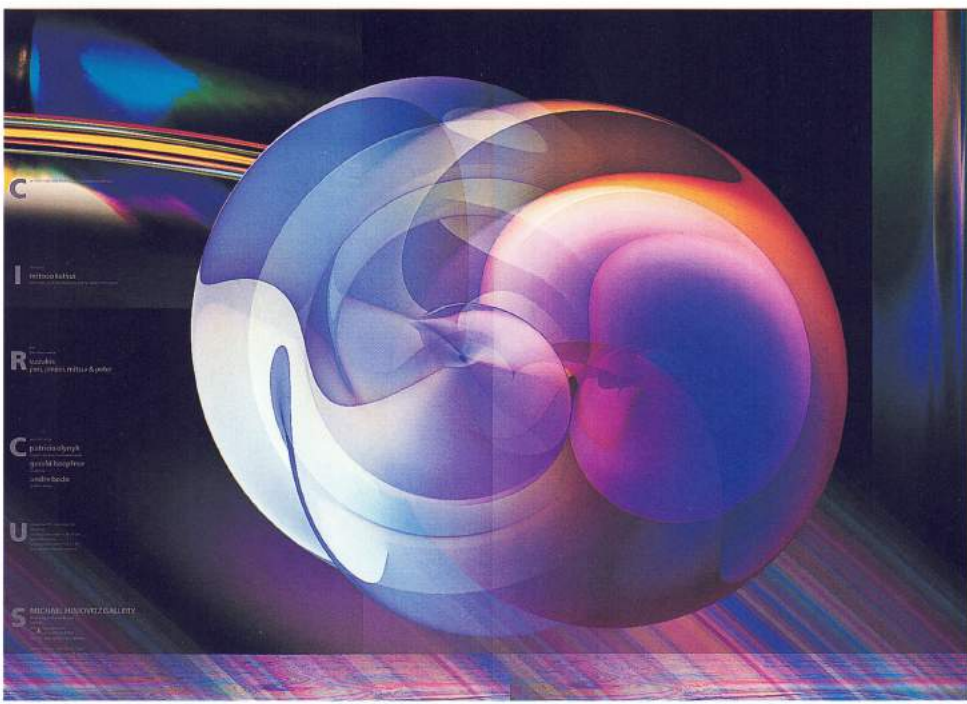
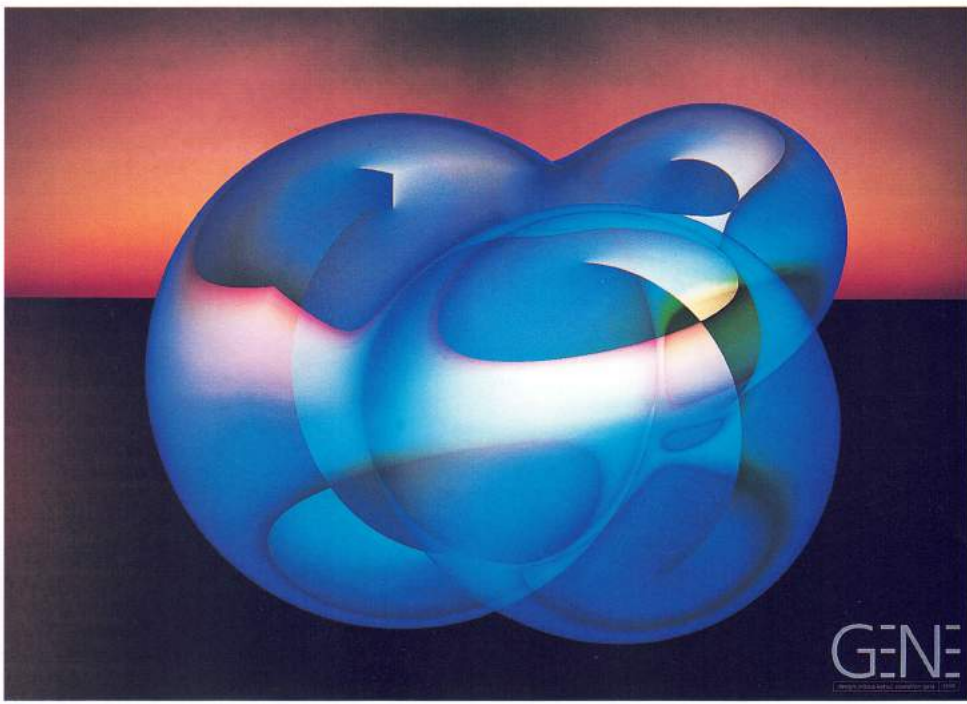
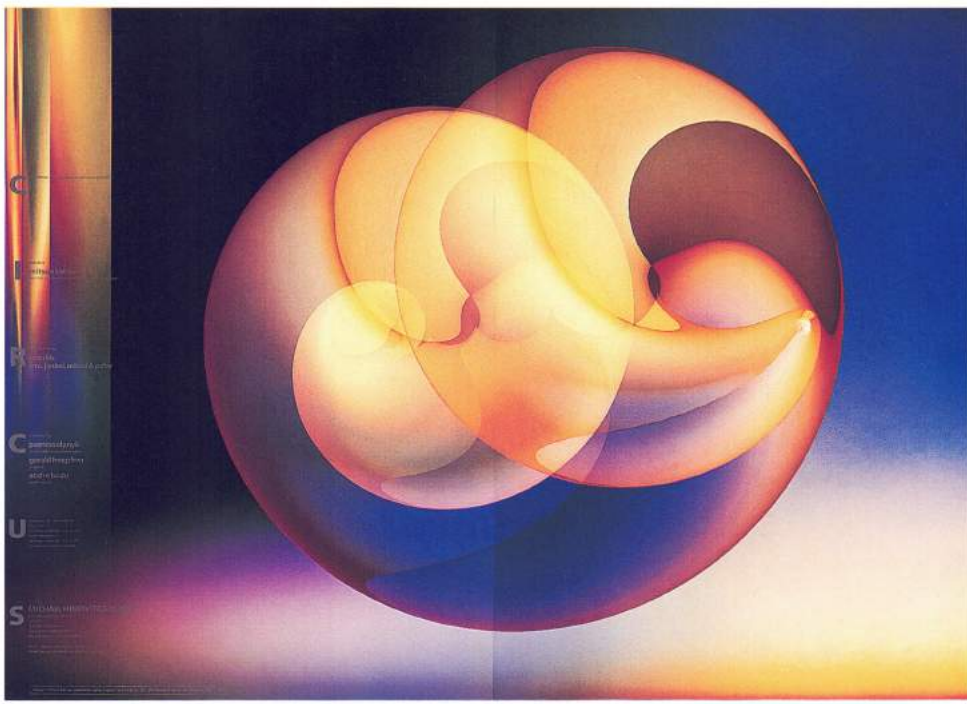


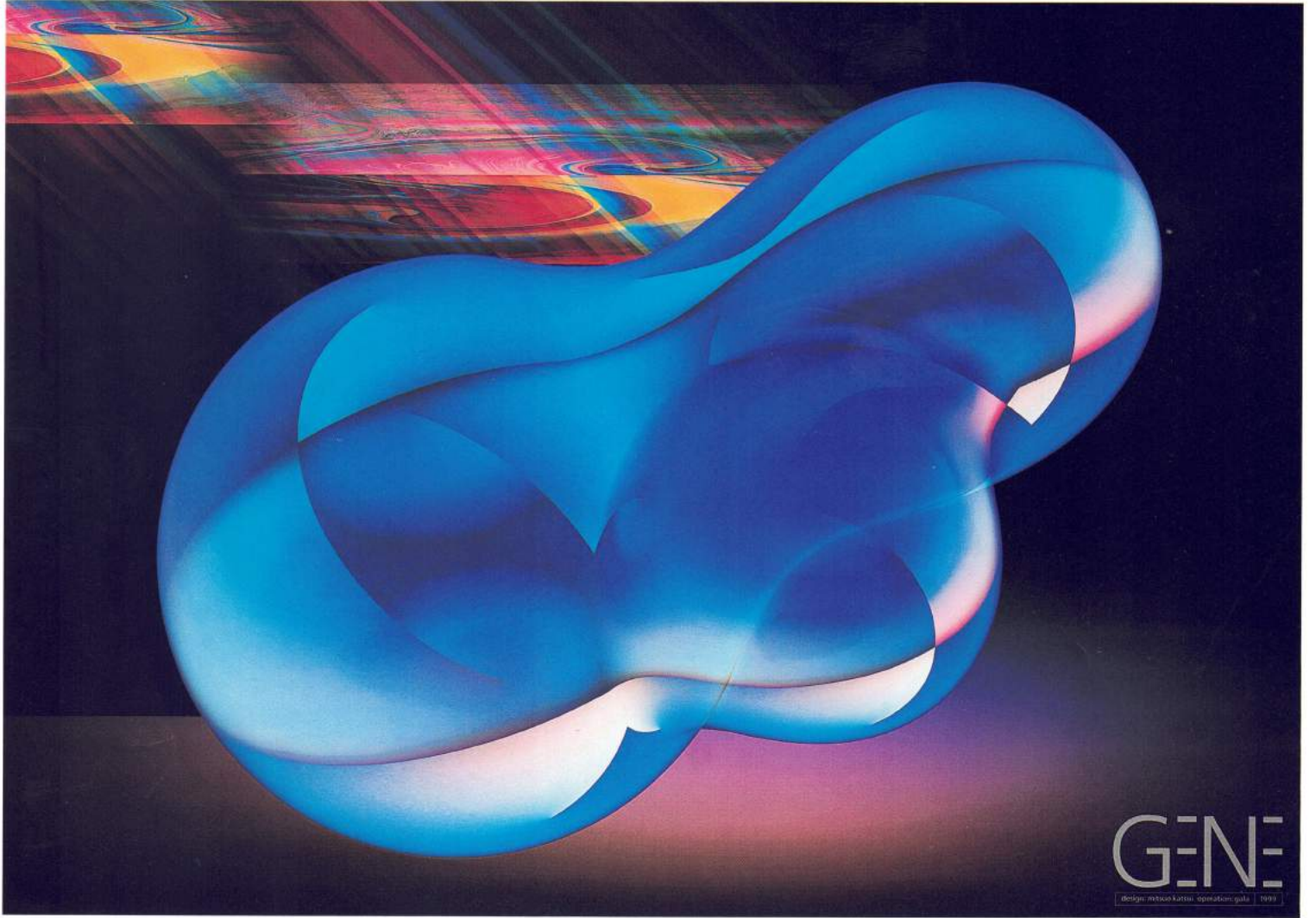
e l f i n l i g h t graphic by mitsuo katsui
K s e r i e s

**PLATS
PLEASE**

ISSEY MIYAKE

Plats Please (Efin Light), 1987 • Creative Director & Designer: Mitsuo Katsui • Computer graphic operation: Kentaro Ota • Client: Issey Miyake Inc.





GENE

design: Mitsuo Katsui, operation: gata 1999



EXPOSITION LE SIECLE DU DESIGN ART-INFO: présent et futur
24 septembre - 9 novembre 1997

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ART-INFO: présent et futur

EXPOSITION
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