

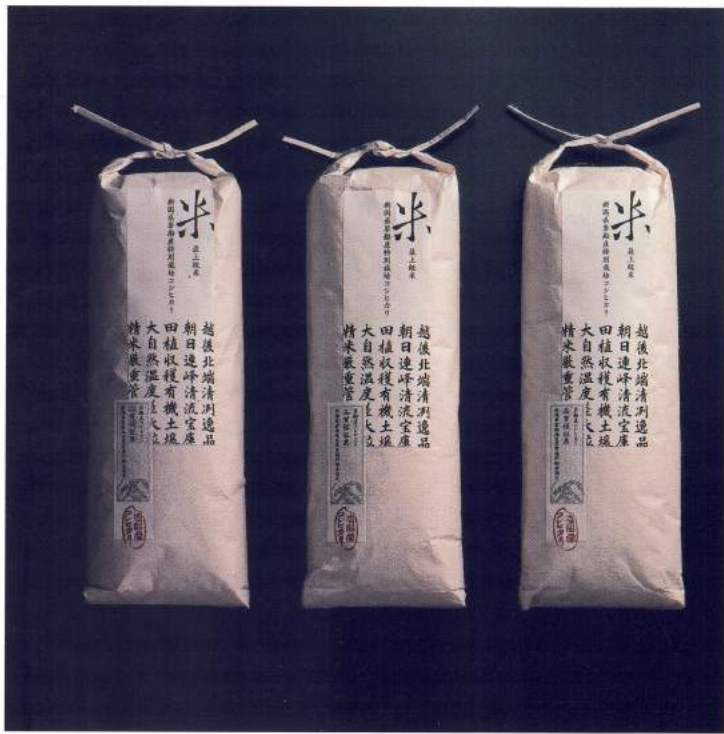
- 6 **Contributors**  
*Op-Art*
- 11 **Brand Tyranny** By Giles Dunn
- 13 **Everything Changes but the Avant-Garde** By Brad Holland  
*Op-Ed*
- 12 **"Reflections in the Glass Ceiling"** By Véronique Vienne
- Focus: Design Project*
- 14 **AlphaZ 33 motorboat design** By Aric Chen  
*Vis-à-Vis*
- 20 **onetree: "The Spirit of the Wood"** By Ken Schulman  
*Artifacts*
- 28 **Constructing an Alternative History of Modernism** By Michael Webb
- Graphic Design*
- 32 **Kenya Hara: Praise the Gap** By Maggie Kinser Saiki  
As a spokesman for the next generation of Japanese designers, Hara, chosen to head the Nippon Design Center, infuses old traditions with new ideas.
- Advertising*
- 54 **Weigertpirouzwolf: Three Hungry Wolves** By Imke Lode  
Ever since they started their own ad agency in 1998, Michael Weigert, Bagher Pirouz and Ewald Wolf are hungry to create the best ads and lead the rest of the pack.
- Photography*
- 68 **Visual Sleight of Hand: Ilan Rubin** By Jack Crager  
Israeli-born Ilan Rubin shoots photographs that blend the sublime with the absurd.
- Graphic Design*
- 82 **Radically Swip Stolk** By Alain Weill  
One of Dutch design's prime movers, meet the man behind the *Dutch* magazine logo and the Groninger Museum identity
- Illustration*
- 100 **Craig Frazier: Things Are Not What They Seem** By Kirk Citron  
In 1996, the graphic arts lost a designer but gained an illustrator. Today, a restless perfectionist tries to remake the world in his own image.
- Interview: Media/Business*
- 112 **Roger Black** By Michael Kaplan  
This publishing mogul's latest venture is heading south into the untapped markets of Mexico.
- New Talent*
- 120 **Cavarpayer: The Cooking Agency from Croatia** By Lazar Dzamic
- Focus: Advertising campaigns*
- 128 **VitroRobertson**
- Tribute*
- 134 **Heinz Edelmann** By Christoph Niemann  
As one of Europe's top design leaders speaking out against corporate design, Edelmann retains his sharp focus and sense of humor in this enlightening interview.
- Book Reviews*
- 140 **Earthly Bodies: Irving Penn's Nudes, 1949-1950** Reviewed by Iana Simeonov
- Q&A*
- 143 **Alexander Gelman**
- Summary Translations*
- 145 **Japanese** By Yoko Minai, Typesetting by Ray Liu
- 149 **Spanish** By Rita Garcia
- 153 **German** By Heinke Jenssen, Klaus Sticker
- 157 **French** By Caroline Droz, Charlotte Rahola; Margie Mounier for translations from French to English





**Kenya Hara: Praise the Gap** By Maggie Kinser Saiki **Portrait by Tamotsu Fujii** Representing a new generation of designers in Japan, Kenya Hara pays tribute to his mentors, using long overlooked Japanese icons and images in much of his work, while helping his colleagues rediscover their imaginations.





In July 2001, 42 year-old graphic designer Kenya Hara became the managing director of Nippon Design Center (NDC), a consortium of corporations and designers that has, since its establishment in 1960, been a beacon and a symbol of hope, for designers and their clients. The founding designers, born into the pre-war nationalism and early post-war destruction in Japan, saw design and consumerism as the path to a new way of life—a more prosperous and happier Japanese society. At NDC, design joined commerce for the sake of the populace. Hara is the first designer born after the US occupation of Japan to take on the leading position. Since its inception, the Center has been in the hands of master designer Kazumasa Nagai, now 73. Hara took the job because he too has a vision, a new notion of design's place in our lives, and he wants to disseminate it worldwide. In the next century, he says design must return to its origin: the imagination.

In the autumn of 2001, Hara travelled on an international lecture and exhibition tour arranged and funded by the Japan Foundation with stops in Toronto, New York, São Paulo, Brazil, and Guanajuato, Mexico. Having met and interviewed him in Japan, I then served as an interpreter when he spoke to an audience of professionals and students at the New York City Technical College about the connection between his own design work and the Japanese visual tradition. His well-honed lecture impressed upon the audience the importance of "emptiness" in both the visual and philosophical traditions of Japan, and its application to design.

John McVicker, City Tech's associate professor of advertising design, who came from Saatchi & Saatchi and spent several years in the '70s art directing for Japan Airlines, asked Hara how he mixed Western and Eastern aspects in his work. Hara replied that he saw no distinction between them. "I was born in 1958. It's all Western," Hara said. "I'm just unearthing Japanese culture myself!" In voicing this simple fact, and attempting to clarify Japanese visual culture, Hara remains distant towards the concepts he is trying to explain, such as emptiness and potentiality.

Hara grew up in a Westernized Japan and lived in a European-style apartment complex in Tokyo. His father, the president of a housing construction company, also held a license as a priest of

Japan's only indigenous religion, Shinto. Although this was a practical choice for Hara's father, the relationship between Shinto and architecture became critical to Hara's understanding of space.

Shinto shrines—neither places of congregation nor places for the dissemination of the dogma—are plain, unpainted wooden structures with minimal ornamentation. In fact, the religion's very representation in architecture was introduced only as an attempt to compete with the lavish temples of Buddhism. Shinto shrines were erected on spots chosen for the awe they inspired for centuries—before the architecture was even introduced. In Shinto, the most sacred space is an empty one. Man's task is to prepare this space for the entry of the gods. Hara's father's license came in handy for the occasional performance of this preparatory ceremony—the *shii-shiki*—before the erection of their house.

Kenya Hara designed the pamphlet for the opening ceremony of the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano following the model of this Shinto preparatory ceremony. In the *shii-shiki*, which can be understood as an invitation to the gods, straw ropes are strung between four free-standing posts, creating an empty space. This space is then purified with salt.

Hara's graphic approach, to visually represent each step of the opening ceremony, was extremely rational, but the effect was profoundly Japanese. Each portion of the opening ceremony referred to a step in the *shii-shiki*, with metaphorical parts played by Sumo wrestlers, children and the Olympic athletes themselves. First, an empty space was invoked by the entrance of the wrestlers, whose costumes—heavy ceremonial aprons tied with white rope—candidly refer to the *shii-shiki* ropes between the posts. In the Olympic version the space was then "purified" by the entrance of children in white costumes, which Hara says represented both snowflakes and salt. In emptying the space, it is filled with "possibility," another recurring concept of Japanese design. The gods—in the form of the Olympic athletes—arrive, a torch is lit, and, Hara explains, we are all cheered by the realization of their entrance.

Did the non-Japanese audience conceptually grasp the space, its emptiness, its purification, and the gravity of the preparations, without which the "gods' entrance" would not be possible? Perhaps not, but the program was beautiful in its visual expression of emptiness and balance, and brought a subtler, emotional response of satisfaction. Hara admits that it might have been foolish to use this Japanese concept of empty space from which to build a meaningful symbol at an international gathering like the Nagano Olympics but, he says, "This is where our sense of beauty originates."

Pointing to some posters he did for an exhibition of his work, Hara explains the difference between non-design (a meaningless symbol) and good design—a symbol, like the Japanese flag, which has no inherent meaning, but is full of the possibility of many converging meanings, which will develop in the dialogue between the viewer and the image. The figures on Hara's posters look something like empty picture frames, but are distorted to just the right degree to suggest other meanings. He claims, "There are no meanings in these figures; they have a strange reality; they are symbols of the viewer's anticipated imagination." The purpose of emptiness is to leave the interpretation up to the audience.

A Japanese conversation, which might be counted as one of the Japanese traditional arts—like the tea ceremony—uses *ma* (pauses, or aural space) to do the same thing. Neither designer nor conversationalist wants to push his ideas on the other party, whether viewer or interlocutor. Hara explains that each party must work to surmise the other's position. This mutual work eliminates three or four steps in the dialogue before the first word is even spoken.



With the students in Brooklyn, Hara concluded the first half of his presentation by saying, "A vessel full of something, mounted high with whatever it may be, is never as beautiful as one that is empty." In the second half of his lecture, Hara presented a project he recently initiated and produced: *Re-design: Daily Products for the 21st Century*—first exhibited in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya in 2000. The exhibition brought more than 10,000 people a day into Tokyo's fashionable Spiral Hall, enough to convince Hara and the NDC to tour it abroad. In 2001, Hara brought it to the Lighthouse Museum in Glasgow, and the next show will be at London's Victoria and Albert, in 2003.

For this project, Hara commissioned 32 of Japan's top creators to redesign pedestrian objects. But the project was not developed to propose actual new products. "Paper house" architect Shigeru Ban re-designed toilet paper, a new, square-cored version that with every "ka-chunk" around the roller reminds us to conserve resources. Creative director and advertising genius Masahiko Sato did passport stamps—a surprisingly powerful medium—with little planes marked "arrival" or "departure," pointing in different directions. Lighting designer Kaoru Mende did "anniversary" matches, in

which a twig lives another life as a light before dying. Final Home fashion designer Kosuke Tsumura re-designed adult diapers as a comprehensive wardrobe of super-absorbent underthings appropriate for people of any age. Architect Kengo Kuma, an advocate of 'invisible architecture' did a cockroach trap that is functional, and doesn't perpetuate the senseless association between an inviting hotel and pest death. Each pairing of object and creator denotes the seriousness of the project and the problem Hara sees with design today: we have lost our faith in imagination. "We can make anything with technology now, and yet nothing we create outside of ourselves seems to even surprise us. We will find the astonishment and foundation for a new phase of life, only within our own imaginations."

Although every product was developed into a prototype, the purpose was simply to focus on the gap—on the vast emptiness between what these creators had proposed and what is available in supermarkets and drug stores. And then to praise that gap. Because it is within that sacred, empty space that we will find design, which Hara defines as, "Stimulating the very hopes and dreams of humankind for a better life." Not more convenient, not faster, but better.

## Credits & Comments

**Pg.34** *Iwafune-Mai Japanese rice packaging, 1999. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: J.A. Iwafune*

This was an attempt to sell rice with strict quality control, much like French wine. I have added contemporary refinements to the traditional package form.

**Pg.36-37 (spread)** *Catalogue for "IM (Issey Miyake) Product" (14.5 x 21.5 cm, offset printing), 1997. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii; Client: On Limit Co., Ltd.*

Manufactured under licensing agreements, each IM Product follows different distribution route, depending on the manufacturer's market. To create a unified brand image among these products sold separately, I edited them into the shape of a novel, as a cohesive story of the world of IM products.

**Pg.38** (4) *Posters for "IM Product" (72.8 x 103 cm, offset printing), 1997. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara, Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii; Client: On Limit Co., Ltd.*

**Pg.39** *Magazine advertisement for "IM Product", (29.7 x 46 cm, offset printing), 1997. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii; Client: On Limit Co., Ltd.*

**Pg.40** *A guidebook for Mukayu, a Japanese-style hotel, 1998. Art Director: Kenya Hara, Designers: Kenya Hara, Rie Shimoda; Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii; Client: Beniya Mukayu*

This is a sales promotion tool for one of the highest quality inns in Japan. Flamboyant advertising would bring a confusing mix of people to the inn, so it seemed important to us to design a communication tool targeting an upper-class clientele. Like something that at first looks wasteful but in fact is extremely useful and beneficial, Mukayu expresses this paradoxical Eastern concept in its design. As a result, the inn got the response it wanted, and is doing excellent business.

**Pg.41** *Skeleton, a collection of Kenya Hara and Taku Satoh package designs, 1995. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii; Client: Rikuyosha*

**Pg.42** *Book design: variations on a theme, 1992. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Kadokawa shoten*

An ongoing book design series for novels by Kaoruko Himeno.

**Pg.43** *Please Steal This Poster (Personal Essays), 1998. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Shinchosha.*

**Pg.44 (top & middle)** *Labels for Grace Wine, 1999. Art Director: Kenya Hara; Designers: Kenya Hara, Rie Shomoda; Client: Central Winery Co., Ltd.*

Wine from the Yamanashi Prefecture—I used vertical Japanese lettering to convey the atmosphere of "Japanese wine." It was perfectly understood by the public, gained popularity and is considered the highest quality wine in Japan.

**Pg.44 (bottom)** *Label for Dandelion Sake, 1999. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Mukawa-cho*

This is a package design I did as a gift to the region boasting the most beautiful and spacious fields of dandelion in all of Japan. More than a product, it is a communication asset. The label carrying the dandelion's seeds suggests the meaning of sake as a medium for distributing a message. I also proposed the idea for a dandelion liqueur.

**Pg.45** *Nikka Whiskey (Alambic) package, 1999. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Nikka Whiskey Distilling Co., Ltd.*

This is one of almost a dozen bottle and label designs I've done to establish the brand image of Nikka Whiskey, one of the country's largest distilleries. For this brandy, I designed a simple, elegant bottle and label.

**Pg.46** *Japanese sake "Hakkin" bottle and label, 2000. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Masuichi Ichimura Shuzo-jo*

I designed a stainless steel bottle with a minimal, hand-made *washi* label for the sake "Hakkin" brewed by the Masuichi sake brewery in the Nagano Prefecture. The mirrored surface expresses "emptiness," and the reflection of the surroundings in the bottle becomes "nothingness."

**Pg.47** *Nikka Whiskey (Coffee Grain) bottle and label, 1992. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Nikka Whiskey Distilling Co., Ltd.*

The label is based on an image of a chalkboard at the entrance of a bistro. Designed for whiskey connoisseurs, this package was a hit in Japan.

**Pg.48** *Posters for the play Contents of a Box, (72.8 x 103 cm, offset printing) 1989. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Tokyo Ichi-kumi*

"Emptiness" is the concept for this poster. By placing numerous posters around the theater's neighborhood, we "produced" the peripheral space with the graphics.

**Pg.49 (top, left & right)** *Takeo Paper World '92. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Takeo Co., Ltd.*

**Pg.49 (bottom, left & right)** *Takeo Paper World '94. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Takeo Co., Ltd.*

These posters were for a complex event targeting graphic designers, with exhibits presenting paper things made with Takeo's new paper. To focus on originality, I created abstract figures with no meaning, but which suggest a presence both common yet strikingly impressive.

**Pg.50** *Kenya Hara exhibition posters, 1995. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Ginza Graphic Gallery*

If you present an empty object, people will fill it with their own meaning. Japan's national flag uses the emptiness of a red circle to create a solid symbol. This poster expresses my graphism, which uses the concept of "emptiness."

**Pg.51** *Posters for the monthly magazine One Volume, 1995-1997. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Asahi Shimbun*

These posters carry the same image as the magazine's covers. The objects have no particular meaning. These are abstract shapes I created as a metaphor for "One Volume." Though they are abstract, they have the texture of reality and give the impression of being "something."

**Pg.52** *Works for the poster exhibition LIFE, 1994. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Client: Japan Design Committee*

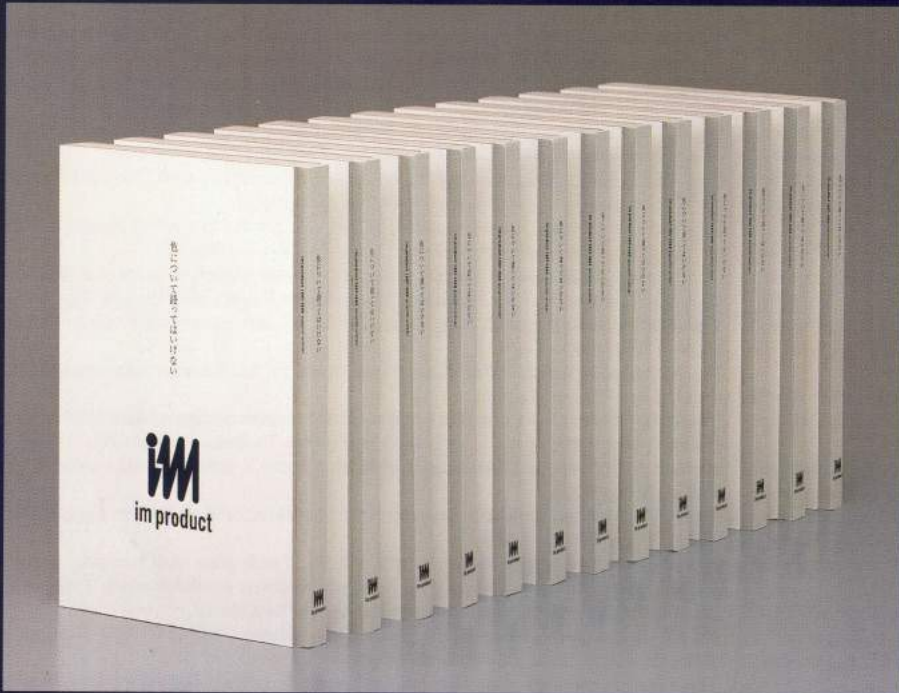
*LIFE* was the theme for this exhibition. The visuals circulate and recur in the following order: "life is there/there is a hope/grow with struggle/struggle for beauty/beauty is life."

**Pg.53** *Poster for the Expo 2005 Aichi (103 x 72.8 cm, offset printing), 2000. Art Director & Designer: Kenya Hara; Illustrator (forest): Takashi Ohno; Client: Japan Association for the 2005 World Expo*

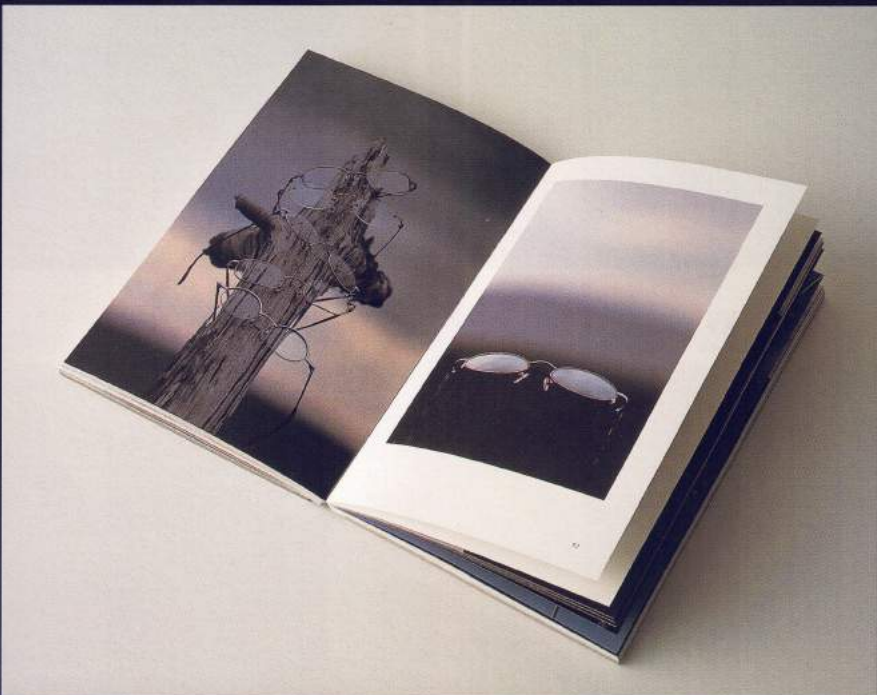
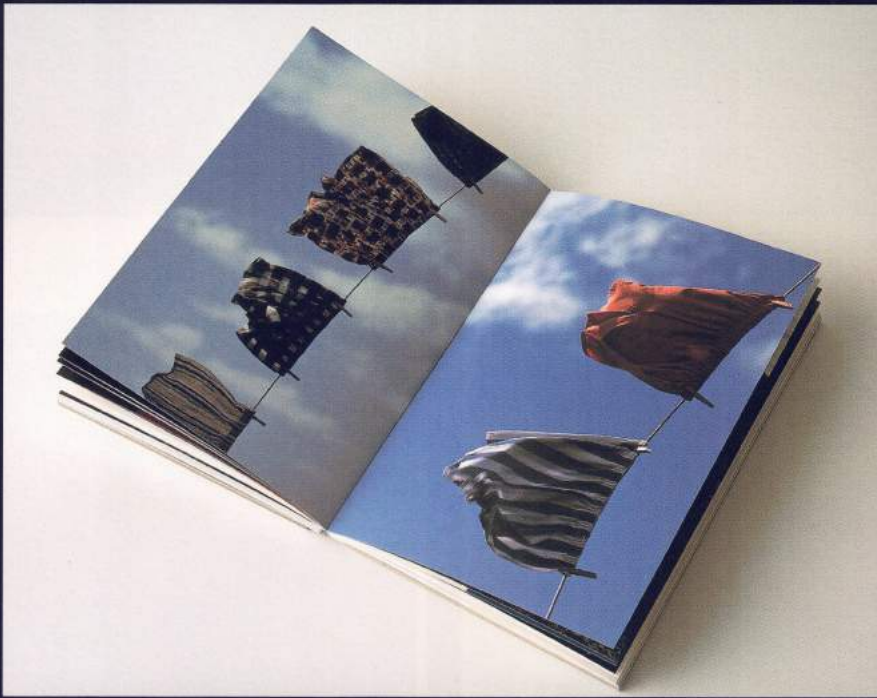
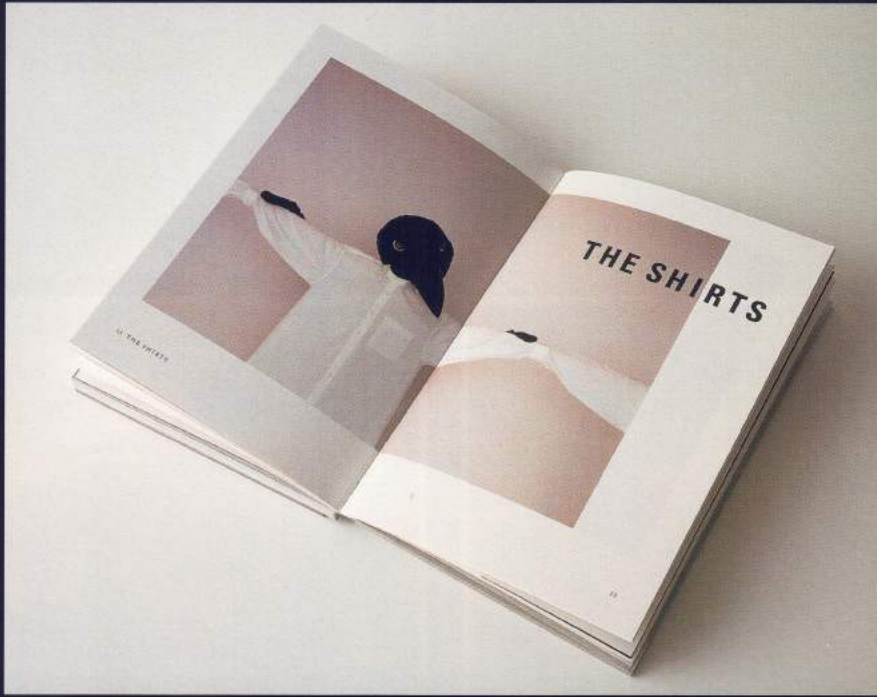
There is no shining image for the future—with every technological advance the distance between ourselves and nature diminishes. This 21st century view of the future may be close to the naive image of nature harbored by mankind in the distant past. To express this message, I used motifs from botanical and zoological art drawn in Japan 300 years ago. Please note: this is not superficial "Japonism."

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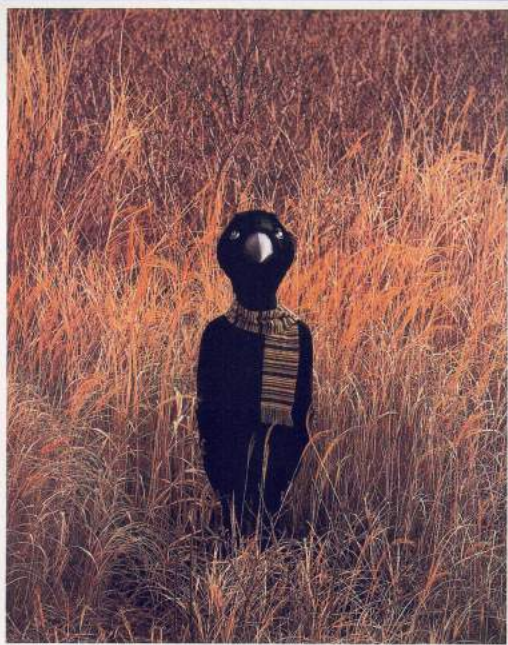








Since its inception, Nippon Design Center has been in the hands of Kazumasa Nagai. Hara took the job because he too has a vision, a new notion of design's place. In the next century, he says design must return to its origin: the imagination.



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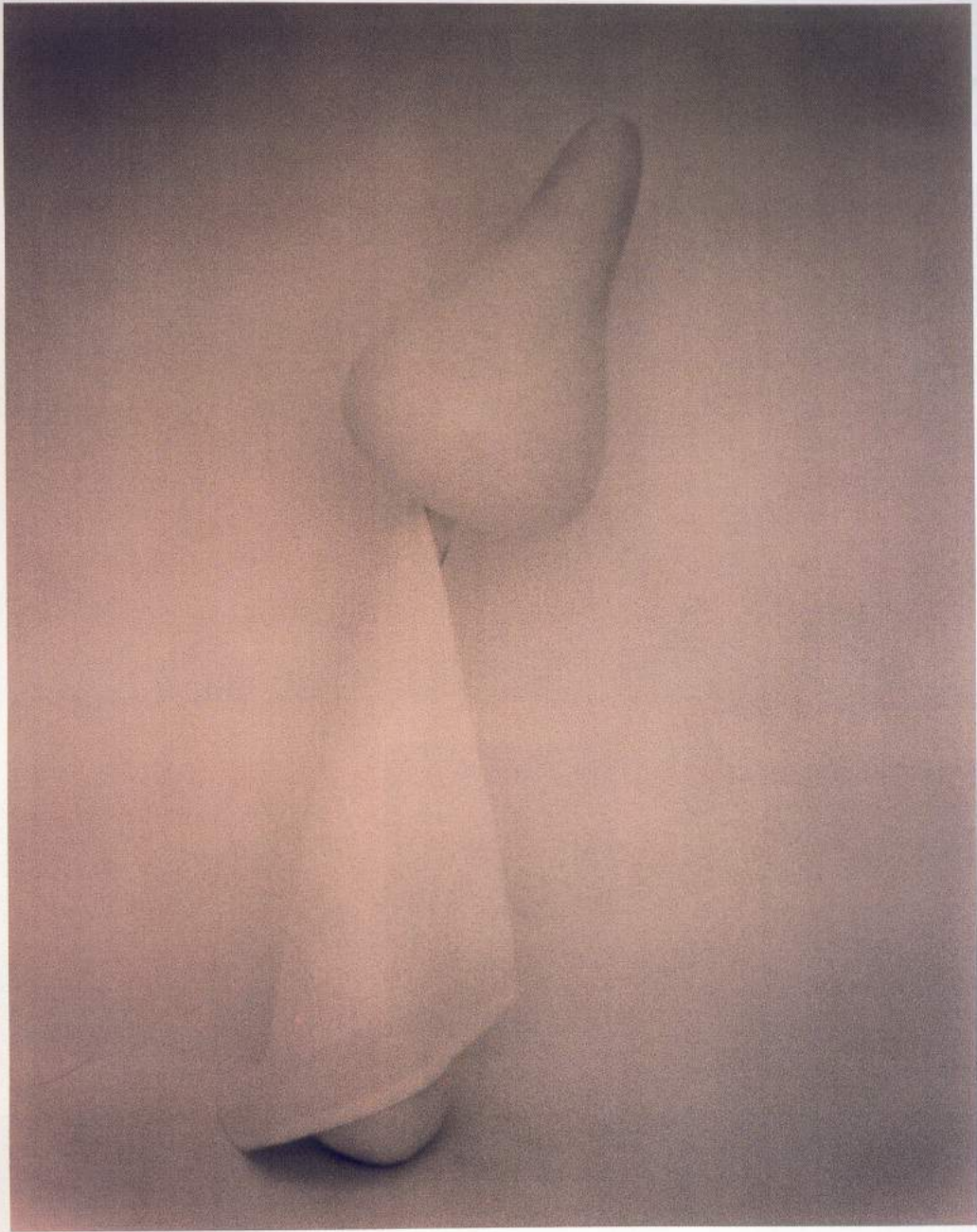


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# S K E L E T O N

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HARA KENYA and SATOH TAKU PACKAGE DESIGN COLLECTION

Photograph by  
FUJII TAMOTSU





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Himeno Kaoruko  
姫野カオルコ

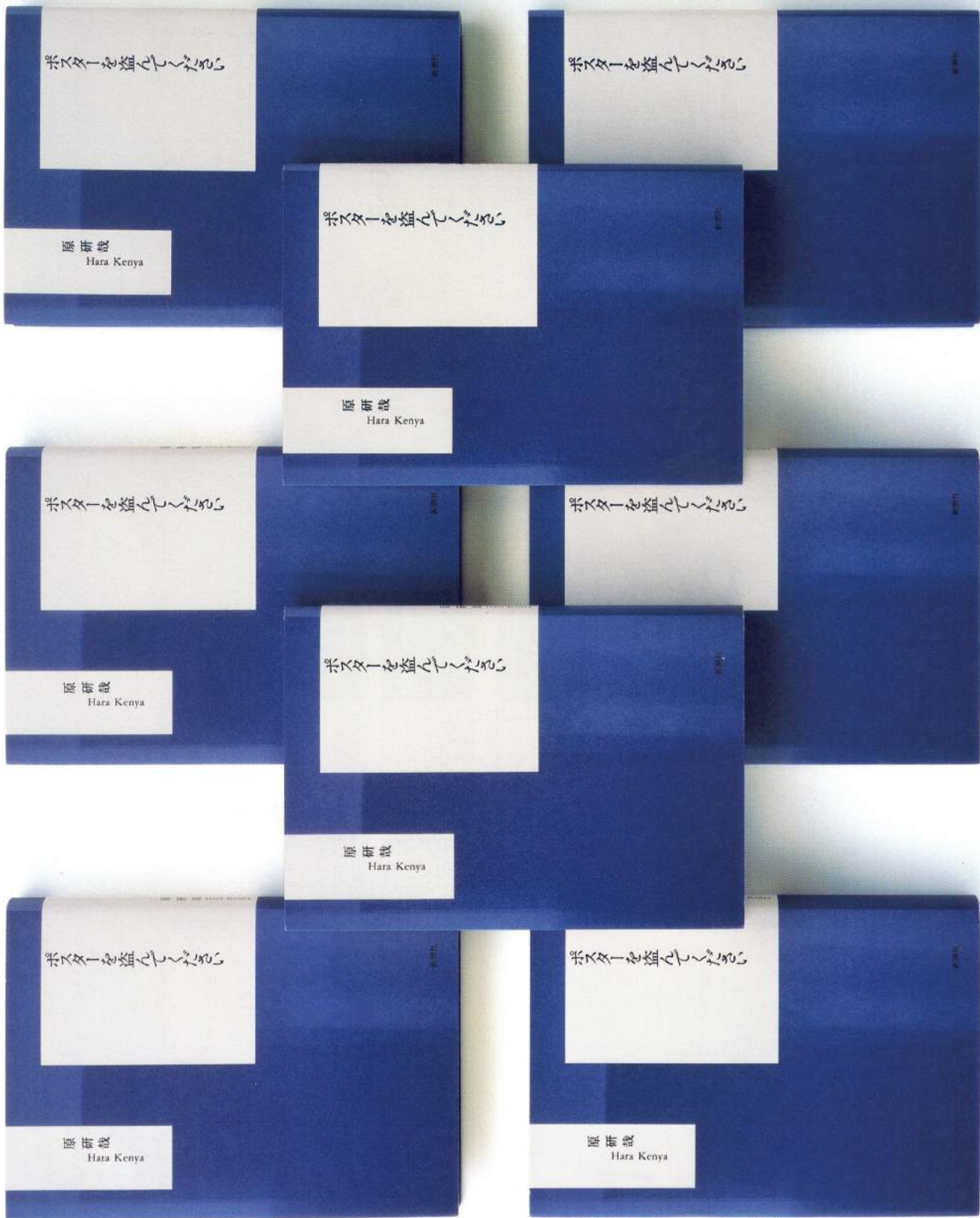
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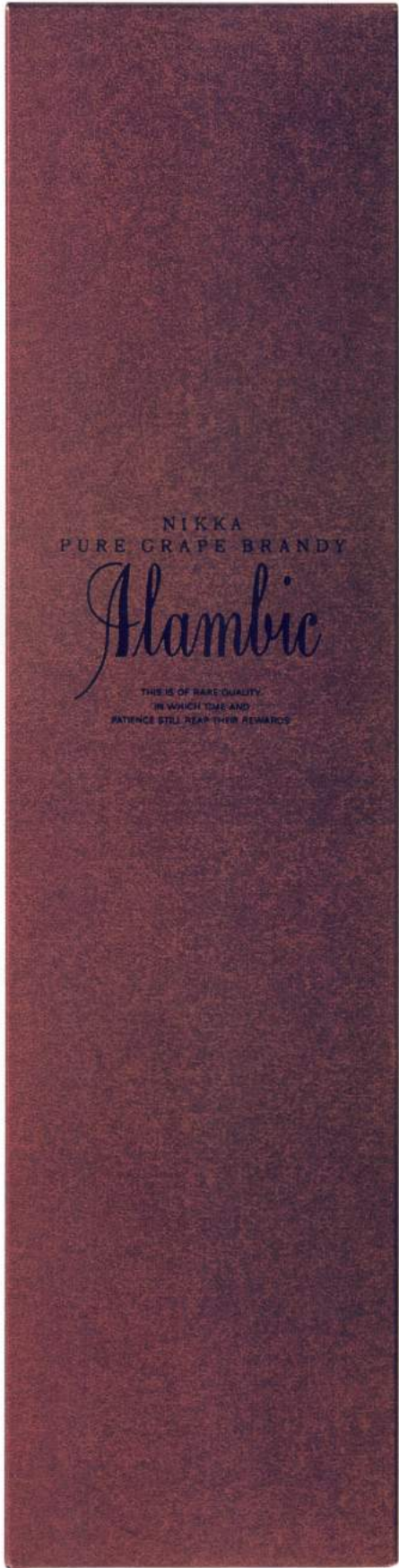












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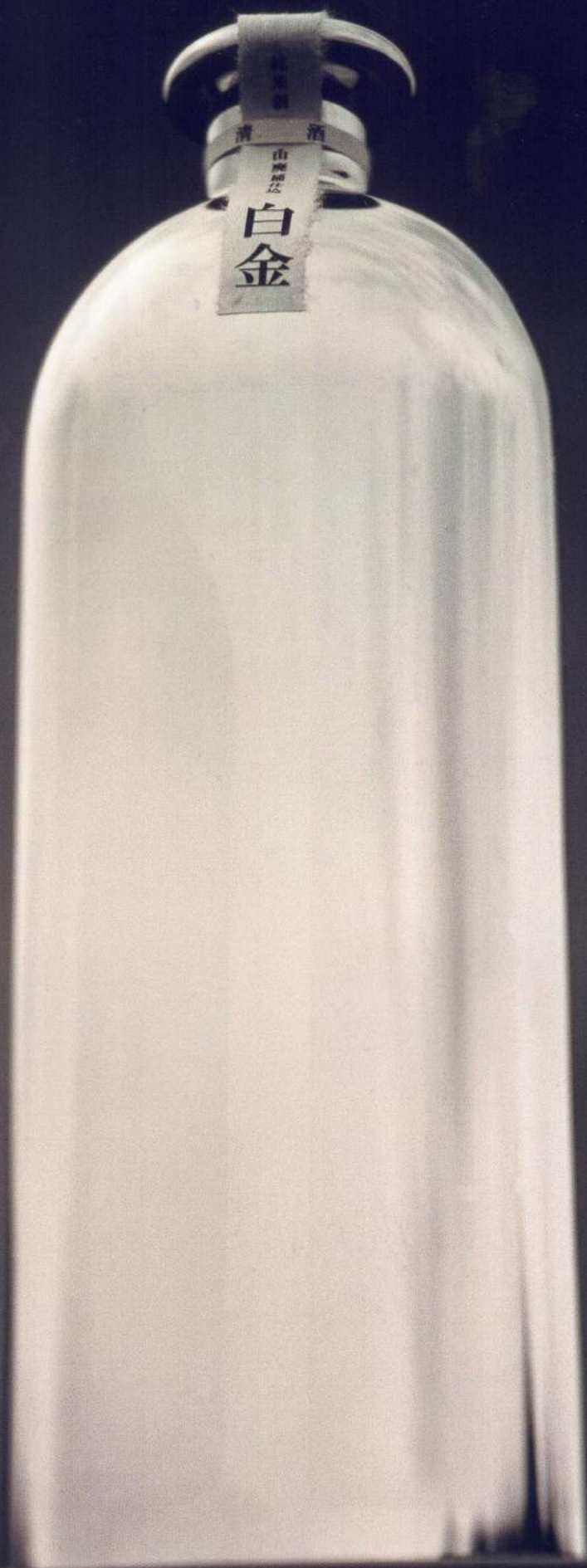
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# EXPO JAPAN 2005

2005年世界万国博覧会 新い地球創造 自然の発見

THE 2005 WORLD EXPOSITION JAPAN BEYOND DEVELOPMENT REDISCOVERING NATURE