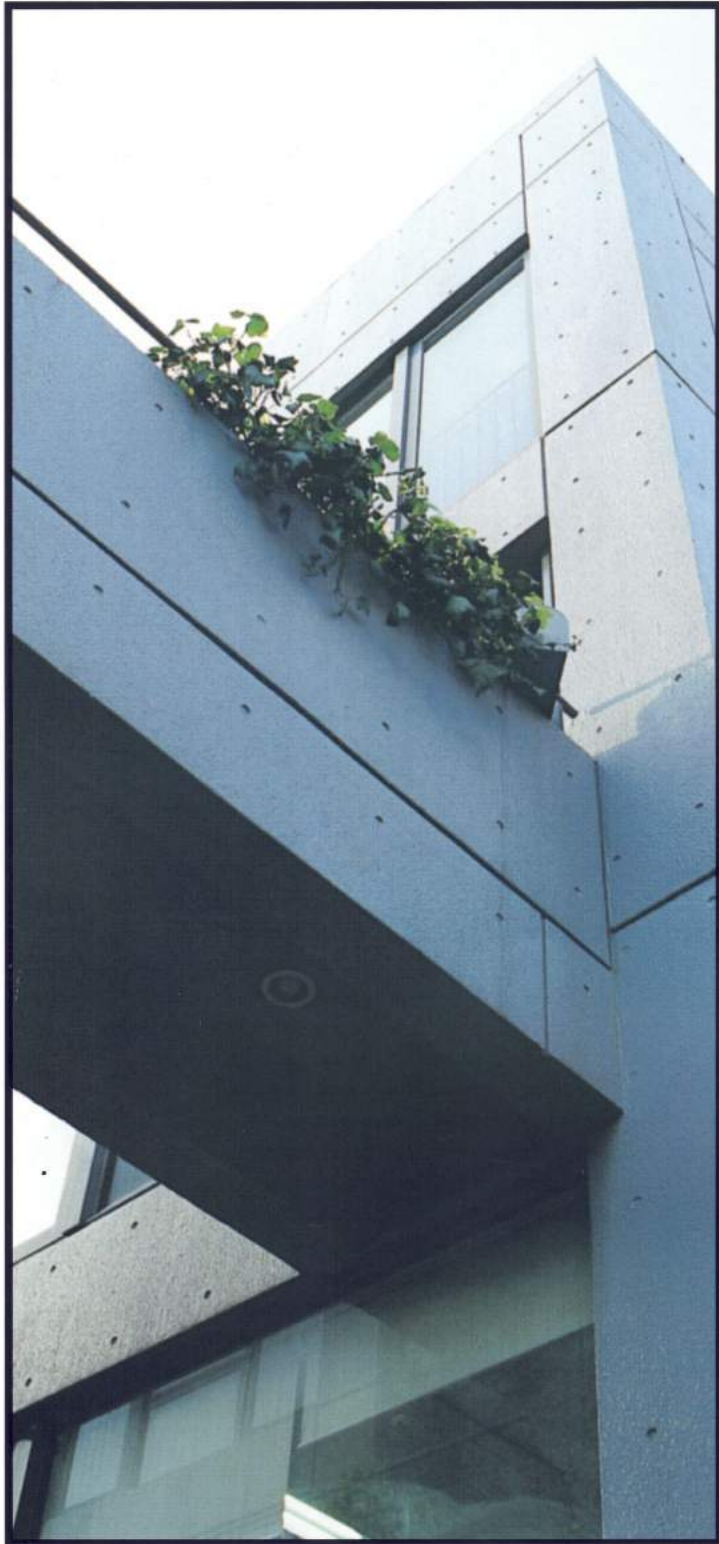




Yasuo Tanaka: "Never Never Land" **Text by Maggie Kinser Hohle** Portrait by Yasuo Tanaka. Since the recession, Japan's packaging has become bipolar: either brashly intrusive or quietly subdued. Fortunately, Yasuo Tanaka, C.E.O. of Package Land, Ltd., is a bit "bipolar" himself. He not only succeeds in the popular conventions but also experiments with the boundaries of packaging, creating intriguing objects too bold to reach the mainstream stands.

Hadaka, or “naked,” is what the Japanese call something without a package or wrapping of some sort, and it’s considered very bad form to carry something naked in public. Even paperbacks are discreetly concealed with logo-patterned paper at the point of purchase, in case you plan to read on the train, in front of strangers. Wrapping connotes distance, and in a crowded, highly hierarchical society like Japan’s, it’s very important to clarify exactly what that distance is. If you’re giving a gift of symbolic importance, say in one of the ritual-



ized gift-giving seasons at midsummer or New Year’s, you should present it in a package that is as ambiguous as possible, evoking a respectful distance between you and the recipient and an elegant distance between the object and its package. If you’re giving something to your neighbor, you should pretend you just pulled it out of your own cupboard and maybe wrap it in some leftover paper you found. Erring either way will make people mad at you, or at least confused: You should never give pre-packaged cookies from the supermarket to a superior, nor should you present a close friend with overly wrapped high-priced cakes from a department store,

unless she’s giving a fancy party to which some not-so-close friends have been invited. The basic rule is this: The closer you get to home, the more casual the wrapping. Until recently, when patronizing your neighborhood shopping arcade it was actually good form to BYOP (Bring Your Own Pan) to the tofu-maker’s shop. Nobody communicates through packaging like the Japanese.

Packaging is traditionally so laden with meaning that how you wrap something is more important than what you wrap. But if you’re a Japanese package designer today, negotiating the new, slower economy is tough going. Yasuo Tanaka, CEO of Package Land Co., Ltd., is trying his best. “The market is gloomy,” he says, “and we have no way of knowing which way it will go. But we’ll just have to find a way through it with our good cheer intact.”

Tanaka grew up on the dark side of Japan, by the Japan Sea, where it’s rainy and cloudy for six months of the year and snowy and cloudy for the other six. He went to university on the southern island of Kyushu because it’s warm. He lives in Tokyo but spends his free time traveling in spacious, sunny American environments, enchanted with the bright colors and atmosphere of major league stadiums, golf courses, and improbably vibrant desert cities like Las Vegas and Santa Fe. He loves gaiety but understands restraint.

Tanaka’s twofold character is serving him well today, because in the midst of Japan’s worst recession since before the war, every product area and retail outlet is bifurcating into two extremes, and the package designer is caught in the middle. “Uniqlo or Chanel, that’s the choice,” Tanaka says. (Uniqlo is like The Gap, only cheaper, featuring mostly rough-stitched unisex clothing in warehouse-sized stores.) Like everywhere else on the planet, in Japan convenience stores are taking over the Ma and Pa shops and on the other end of the scale there will soon be nothing left but high-end department stores. During the “bubble years” of the late 80s, package designs and fees were out of hand, so something had to change. Tanaka says that the market has finally calmed down, “to the level of real life.”

Unfortunately, real life in urban Japan, where the money is, is dominated by availability, speed, and price. That’s why there are 50,000 convenience stores and the restrictions and competition for packaging products for them are brutal. “Package design has been subsumed into the distribution system,” Tanaka tells me. “Between that and the bad economy, it’s pretty hard to hold on.” Products have only one week to do or die, and digitalization has spawned a slew of what Tanaka calls “average, as opposed to professional” package design, which depends almost wholly on graphics. Conceptual packaging or packaging that explores the possibilities of form and construction are almost nonexistent in these quick-sell venues. In these cases, Tanaka does what’s expected: he uses photographs of the object inside to help the consumer decide quickly what to buy. Then he exercises his minimal freedom by playing with the form, arousing interest in the product by making the box surprising, as in his package for Porcal Cream Cheese Sandwich Crackers.

The problem with convenience stores and the packaging they produce is that they only work in convenience stores—brightly lit gladiator’s pits of commercial competition. Taking the products out of that context, (to extend the “naked” metaphor to its extreme), is like seeing a prostitute in a church: in a normal environment, they look shockingly garish and scantily attired.

Tanaka didn’t get much out of his university schooling, but early on he joined an extracurricular group that gave him a head start on package design. In the weekly “paper group,” a big-name designer taught Tanaka and four others, among them professors and professional designers, what you could do with paper. The group made calendars, packages, mobiles, and presentations to the instructor. In his senior year, Tanaka entered a Coca-Cola carrying case design into an annual competition sponsored by Oji Paper, the largest paper manufacturer in the country, and won. Oji hired Tanaka and for the next ten years he did basic research into the market, materials, and machinery of packaging. He spent his formative years training himself to see and use graphics, materials, and forms as separate entities, and he has no intention of allowing graphics to dominate

his work just because everyone else does. In recent years, Tanaka has been experimenting with the limits and meanings of form and material. His work for exhibitions tackles these questions: milk cartons deconstructed and reconstructed into adaptable sculpture, bags pierced by boxes and bags sprouting cubes, laminated boxes illuminated from within, and a hand gripping a cell phone shrinkwrapped to death. How does one interpret such work: Is Tanaka describing the suffocation of communication? Is Tanaka frustrated with the packaging business?

He has never lost that dark, Japan Sea perspective, so, yes, sometimes he gets depressed. But Tanaka can inject playfulness into packaging, even for the ubiquitous "towel gift," which is what the Japanese give when they can't think of anything else, or when a perishable ritual gift is impractical. Gift towels are sold at all kinds of retailers, but the sales floor is inevitably dull, filled with slight variations on the rectangular box with the transparent plastic lid. For Honda he made "T's Stone Gift," an earth-toned towel packaged in an octagonal box. He deliberately put a simple, flexible towel into a complex, rock-shaped box, expressing a very soft thing as a very hard thing, because, as he said, "... a towel *can* become a stone. I thought it would be fun."

Tanaka occupies an office designed by architect Ando Tadao, and he treats it, he says, "like a big toy box." Sporadically, he straightens it up, but more often he collects bits and pieces of interesting paper and string and stashes it there so that in the middle of the night, he explains, "I can find the perfect material, before the idea disintegrates." The original kanji (Chinese character) for "wrap" is the embryo, and the primary Japanese wrapping is the furoshiki, a square piece of cloth, portable and unobtrusive, that can be as small as a hankie, a full meter square, or any size in between, but both are purely functional. Whenever possible, the Japanese intensify the

visual and tactile experience with variety, which for packaging is expressed in materials and graphics, and for which the possibilities seem endless. Tanaka is a master at using them to intimate a multitude of cultural locales and moods. For products of western origin, he tends to use western materials, like corrugated cardboard and straw for a summer gift of Suntory Whiskey, and English type and copy, which for a Japanese audience has the added charm of being visually recognized before it's actually read or understood. For traditional Japanese products, he chooses mostly Japanese materials like washi paper, woven string closures, and even gold thread and pine needles, as well as all three forms of written Japanese, any of which can be read top to bottom, left to right, or right to left.

Yasuo Tanaka is a successful package designer in a competitive and imitative market. But there just doesn't seem to be room in Japan today to consider the essence of ideal package design. Materials and forms have to be designed for shipping and storage, graphics for tightly confined use within a ritualized society. So finally, Tanaka expresses his questions by experimenting with self-promotion pieces or exhibition packages, most of which are conceptual and impractical to the extreme, things that ask the viewer: What is a package and what does it mean? Recent examples are a 3-D valentine's package that looks like a cactus and a shrinkwrapped group of well-sharpened colored pencils, each one about to poke through the membrane. Ouch! Within this oeuvre there are packages that could be produced if consumers were interested in enjoying a package for its melding of function, form, and graphics. For example, a bath-beads dispenser Tanaka made out of translucent plastic, button fasteners, and plastic tubing works beautifully and radiates cheer in the bathroom. It may be too far outside the box for the Japanese public, but Tanaka must be thanked for continually pushing the boundaries.

Credits & Comments

Pg. 30 Yasuo Tanaka, self-portrait.

Pg. 32 Package Land's office in Osaka. Architect: Tadao Ando

Pg. 34-35. Gift, 1994. Art Direction & design: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Arab Coffee Arab Coffee, a small Osaka-based coffee wholesaler, decided to approach the consumer market, beginning with the gift market. (Coffee is one of the non-perishable products often given during the two annual gift seasons as well as for numerous other gift occasions.) As its name was unknown to consumers, the client wanted a gift package that would set it aside from giant rivals like UCC, who opt for rather ordinary and colorless designs. I redesigned the logo and created a comprehensive corporate identity program, focusing on the logo. The customer participates in the discovery of the logo; the recipient of the gift box looks for it in black gloss on black matte. On the cans, I made the logo so large that the customer sees only part of it at once. He has to rotate the package to read it. Again diverging from typical rivals' packaging, the various colors differentiate the wide range of blends and impart a chic, gourmet image.

Pg. 36 Canadian Club Gift, 1988. Art Direction: Hiroshi Yokoo; Design & construction: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Suntory.

During the "bubble" economy, when money was running thick, there were a lot of gift packages. This assignment dates from that period. The ordinary Canadian Club package had been a simple folding box printed with the logo, which wouldn't make a very good gift. As for gift boxes, the average rival box would typically feature a photograph of the product. I used a photograph of wood as the identifying image because it is the most familiar Canadian export. I then devised a tubular box onto which a plastic top and bottom are clipped, making the box look like a single piece of Canadian lumber. The package was so successful that Suntory asked me to design a series of packages based on the same construction for its other imported liquors.

Pg. 37 Sake, 1999. Art Direction and design: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Kinsei Shuzo Originally, Nara Prefecture was known as Yagyu, named after the clan that held power there in the age of the samurai. This Yagyu sake brewery, run by the same family for generations, came to me asking for a new image to bolster falling sales, which have plagued every small brewery in the country since the economy began to falter. Its hard to believe, but in Japan, there are now some canned alcoholic beverages that are cheaper than soda, and the market share of Japanese sake has plummeted. For this ancient sake, known as Spring Rise, I created a fresh image out of the original calligraphy and a symbolic Japanese sword stroke (in white) against a green mountain, which represents the country hometown to Japanese. The modern blue frosted bottle and the cap are also innovations meant to invoke a fresh start. Although as a small business, the client can't accurately analyze the market results of this new package, it has asked me to design several others.

Pg. 38 Greeting Card, 1992. Art Direction, design & construction: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Package Land.

In keeping with the national custom, my office sends out greeting cards twice a year, once in midsummer, and once at New Year's. Because 1992 was the Year of the Monkey, we sent out hand-made swinging monkeys.

Pg. 39. Cactus Gift, 1991. Art Direction & Design: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: PKL.

The original idea for this cactus came from a Seibu "theme exhibit" for Valentine's Day, in which the department store asked several designers to make something based on the holiday theme. I'd been going to Arizona a lot at that time, so I chose the cactus for its charming, exotic shapes. The three-dimensional aspect of the object allowed me to exercise my abilities as a package designer. We made these by hand, so mass-production restrictions didn't apply to project.

Pg. 40 Air Spencer, 1999. Art Direction & design: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Eikosha

The tetrapod bottle was another response to the difficult market, in which the prices are all about the same. The minuscule size of each triangular surface—about two centimeters—made the design of the label the most difficult part of the project. In Japan, most clients know only their own business. Doing this project I realized again that we've had so much experience in so many product areas that our clients clearly benefit from the range.

Pg. 41 Book Design, 1998. Art Direction & Design: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Japan Package Design Association

Entry in a competition for the cover of the package design annual. With Photoshop, it's possible to create the illusion of layering, but this project makes the layers real. When designing a package, the designer makes choices about the exposure of the product, i.e., how much or how little of it to show and which parts. I wanted to express that world of possibility. In this piece, two layers of translucent film partially obscure the cover, which is a two-dimensional layering of lettering, allowing the viewer to experience a variety of impressions simultaneously.

Pg. 42 Golf-Ball Gift, 1998. Art Direction, design & construction: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Sumitomo Rubber

Golf is one of the most expensive sports in Japan. When I got this project, the 10,000-yen price tag on a top-end package of 12 balls was equal to about \$100. One game of golf would set a player back several hundred dollars. As the economy began to spiral downwards, Sumitomo Rubber asked me to design a golf-ball package that would also position this expensive product as a gift. This would add a niche to the central market, which is geared toward the regular golfer. I used both construction and imagery to impart an element of luxury. I housed the sets in a series of heavy, book-style glossy boxes, and photographed satin of different colors to differentiate the various grades and give the product a soft yet precious aspect. It's a far cry from the usual packages, which normally feature a photo of a golf ball. Over the last couple of years, the golf market has diminished so much that it's hard to tell what effect the package has had on the product's sales.

Pg. 43 Air Spencer, 1999. Art Direction & design: Yasuo Tanaka; Client: Eikosha

Normally in this product area, the dozen or so manufacturers, which are all selling similar products, compete with label designs and bottles. The challenge with this product was to make it pop out enough in the retail environment to catch the customer's eye, but then make it easily fit into and be suitable for the environment of any kind of car, from a Toyota to a Mercedes. I used the frosted bottle to express quality. From behind the translucent glass, the color of the air freshener appears cool and reserved.







Canadian Club
Blended Canadian Whisky
Distilled and Bottled under
Canadian Supervision by
Hiram Walker & Sons
Walkerville, Ontario, Canada
THIS WHISKY IS 6 YEARS OLD

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ウイスキー特級

IMPORTED

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最上之証 錦生醸造合名会社謹醸

菩提瓶仕込み



お酒は20歳になってから。

