by Maryam Monalisa Gharavi

An exhibition at the Noguchi Museum reveals how the artist’s experience in a World War II internment camp altered both his art and his sense of identity.


THE LAST PROJECT Isamu Noguchi worked on before voluntarily entering Poston War Relocation Center in the Arizona desert in 1942 was a portrait of Ginger Rogers in pink Georgia marble. “Head busting,” as he often called working on portrait commissions, contributed to his income and helped him cultivate new patrons. He had started Rogers’s bust on the grounds of her Hollywood Hills mansion sometime between the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the signing of Executive Order 9066 in February of the following year. That mandate declared the West Coast of the United States a military zone, precipitating the incarceration of Japanese citizens as well as immigrants from Japan and their descendants. As a result of Roosevelt’s directive, 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were held in ten US camps, the largest of those being Poston.

Noguchi, who finished the portrait at the camp, sent the final work to Rogers with a matter-of-fact note that the sculpture’s wooden base was a temporary solution: “I could not do better as we have nothing but scrap wood, it is not even the right size.” He adds, almost sheepishly: “The circumstances of its making was [sic] strange, I guess somewhat symbolic too.” The note is among the archival documents from the period included in “Self-Interned, 1942: Noguchi in Poston War Relocation Center,” at the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens. Writings by the artist displayed in the exhibition record his experience and offer context for some of the sculptures and architectural plans he made during his seven-month confinement. Yet, by including a wide range of sculptures dating before and long after Noguchi’s desert internment, the exhibition proposes a broader hypothesis, suggesting that incarceration left a lasting impact on the artist, prompting shifts in his approach to form and materials and forcing him to reckon with his identity as Japanese-American.

Though the Ginger Rogers bust is not in the show—a similar portrait of actress Lily Zietz is on view—the piece embodies the tragic ironies of Noguchi’s time at Poston. A government circular from the period featured a jovial description of the sculpture. No mention was made of the surreal contrast between the work—a depiction of a blonde icon of all-American optimism—and the conditions of its production in internment. Officials maintained that Poston was part of a democratic America even as they enforced a policy termed “evacuation” and “clearing.” Such doublespeak may have assuaged citizens outside the camps, but it had little to do with the experience of those who were rounded up, displaced, fingerprinted, examined by medical professionals, given a serial number, and asked to take a loyalty oath.

Noguchi entered Poston at age thirty-seven with the aim of creating an arts program for detainees. Because he had resided in New York prior to Pearl Harbor, he was not subject to mandatory detention. At a meeting in Washington, D.C., he persuaded John Collier, social reformist and commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under Franklin Roosevelt, to help him enlist at the camp. Collier agreed, in part, because he and Noguchi shared an interest in improving the lives of camp detainees through the design of playgrounds and community centers, for example. Once Noguchi experienced incarceration, however, he realized that Collier’s social optimism—his belief that the camp could be made into a democratic space—was profoundly misplaced. “As if you can save democracy by locking people up,” Noguchi wrote.

Before his internment, Noguchi was accustomed to viewing himself as a Euro-American and Asian mixture, easily adapting to various cultural and intellectual milieus. His father was poet Yone Noguchi, whose Seen and Unseen, or, Monologues of a Homeless Snail (1897) is among the first books of poetry by a Japanese-
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OPENED IN 1985, three years before his death, the Noguchi Museum was established by the artist to display his work. The museum’s tranquil home, tucked away in a rare leafy tract of Long Island City, is a former photoengraving plant built in the 1920s. Its light-filled galleries are populated by sprawling groups of Noguchi’s work, and the distinction between permanent displays and special exhibitions is often blurred. Curated by Dakin Hart, “Self-Interned” coincides with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the internment camp authorization. Although critics have stressed its parallels to contemporary politics, the show was planned prior to the Trump administration’s inauspicious January 2017 Executive Order 13769, or “Muslim ban,” which restricted entry to the US for citizens of some Muslim-majority countries. Rather than offering direct commentary on contemporary developments, the exhibition speculates broadly about the role of art during periods when democratic values are suspended.

Some aspects of “Self-Interned” appear directly linked to the experience of internment. The predominance of wood, for example, may reflect the scarcity of other materials available to Noguchi in a wartime prison camp. Its use may also indicate his ingenuity in embracing the ruggedness of the desert through makeshift assembly. One piece made in New York following his return from Poston is This Tortured Earth (1943), a bronze model for an unrealized landscape design. Pocked with twisted craters that seem to emblematize a brutal landscape, the work alludes to a consciousness seared with the scars of bomb-filled battlefields overseas or the blistering hardship of camp life. It is striking that most of the sculptures on view that reflect anguished moods were produced after Poston, as Noguchi often displayed a sense of subtlety and nuance by alluding to his realities while conjuring an imaginative space apart from them.

The show suggests that Noguchi processed the experience of living in a camp through the formal language of sculpture. If sculpture is a medium concerned with the occupation of physical space and the relationship between form and ground, what happens to the work of a sculptor whose compatriots have been made politically groundless and existentially “cleared”?

Throughout his career, one of Noguchi’s greatest skills as an artist was the ability to control how traces of his hand would be revealed or concealed in a work, leading to an intricate play of hide and seek. He aimed to foreground “nature’s accidents and residue”: the lumps, abrasions, and scars on raw stone, or the rivulets covering two carmine-colored humps of Persian travertine in The Mountain (1964). “But I am also a sculptor of the West,” he wrote. “I place my mark and do not hide.”4 Irregular natural forms, visited by time and age, make way for the intrusion of the human hand. The show’s selection features work in which stone, wood, and steel have been folded over and bent like paper—all without seeming to flout inherent material properties.

One consequence of this masterful marriage of material and artistic technique is that abstracted objects come to resemble anthropoids. Noguchi magnified the qualities of natural materials while still allowing a level of human identification with his objects. Anthropometry is the scientific study of the measurements of the human body, and Noguchi’s sculptures manage to evoke the anthropometric proportions of eyes, torsos, and penises while respecting the proportional harmony inherent in a chunk of stone or piece of wood. In other words, the organic/human and inorganic/matter never overpower each other.

“Self-Interned” places this sensibility in tension with the dehumanizing experience of internment. Two elegant installations of work Noguchi made between the 1950s and 1987, a year before his death, gesture toward the lasting effect of this tension. Titled “Gateways” and “Deserts,” these sections occupy adjacent galleries separated by a wall. On my recent visit, Hart described how the placement and

the heat that drives me frantic." In the essay "I Become a Nisei," written for Reader’s Digest but unpublished, at least partly due to its unvarnished qualities, he specified: “Eye-burning dust, and the temperature seemed to stand at 120º for three solid months.” The desert landscape—from its indifferent vastness to its gold-crimson hues—ineradicably altered Noguchi’s life and art. Poston’s location within a dusty Arizona valley made for a scale-defeating human helplessness, arguably buttressed by the realization that in a system of racial supremacy, art alone will not save you.

With his organic forms and landscape-inspired reliefs, Noguchi has long been discussed in relation to Biomorphism, a term coined by British writer Geoffrey Grigson in the nineteenth century and revived by Museum of Modern Art director Alfred H. Barr in the 1930s. But Noguchi’s pursuits superseded a general European modernist discourse. In the context of Poston, the artist’s organic shapes contrast pointedly with the gridlike orderly structures of the camp. The racialized logic of internment also underscores the specific importance of East Asian philosophies to Noguchi’s project.

As artist Lee Ufan writes in The Art of Encounter (2004), the relationship between self and other in Western society relies on human-centric thought structures. “In East Asia, on the other hand,” Lee argues, “there is a tendency to emphasize a territory of otherness in relationships with natural things like animals, plants, stone, and earth.” Lee describes a “mediation of a relationship with uncertain, inorganic things” rather than evoking facets of human-based recognition and consciousness. Similarly, critic Thomas B. Hess, a friend of Noguchi’s, commented on the artist’s concern with timescales that far exceed a human lifespan. “He was fascinated by the idea of erosion,” Hess writes. “He was attracted to objects that had survived from another era and that had been

layout of each section reflects Noguchi’s belief in “mobile meaning,” a concept the artist learned while apprenticing with Constantin Brancusi. The Romanian modernist advocated for displays of sculptures in groupes mobiles (mobile groups), arrangements in which the staging of various objects is given equal weight to their individual structures.

Portals are a key motif in the works included in “Gateways,” with many pieces inviting viewers to look both at and through them. Hart’s selection foregrounds the acts of seeing and being seen, dramatizing the dynamic relationship between concealment and display. Sentinel (1973), a stainless-steel structure that looks simultaneously human-scaled and behemoth, resembles either standing binoculars or an observation tower from which the viewer might be surveilled. Worm Pyramid (1965) is a hunk of granite through which a twisting passageway has been burrowed; the titular worm appears to have both created a hiding place for itself and performed a creative act by shaping the material to its will.

The pieces in “Deserts” spotlight the stark severity of the Western environment. Double Red Mountain (1969), for example, is a slab of red Persian travertine on a waist-high wood base—the stone formed so that a pair of steeply rising slopes appear to flank an eroded valley. The archival documents on display nearby detail Noguchi’s struggle with the desert climate. In a startling May 1942 letter to his friend Man Ray, the interned artist highlighted the blazing heat in Poston. “Our pre-occupations are the intense dry heat, the afternoon dust storms,” Noguchi complained. Near the end of the letter he emphasized: “Maybe its [sic] the weather that makes everything so unreal. O! for the sea! an orange! [sic]” Two months later, in the postscript of a letter to Collier, a self-described “embittered” Noguchi longed for an exit plan: “I might add it’s
Exhibition view. Photo Nicholas Knight.
Noguchi unquestionably longed for identification with Japanese-American internees, as life in the camps inspired solidarity.

formed by the process of destruction.” Noguchi had a term for the objects he collected, such as the knots of wood arranged on a plinth in one of the exhibition’s galleries: time locks. In considering the material just as it is, Noguchi sought to understand the passage of time apart from human agency. In Listening to Stone, her expansive biography of the artist, Hayden Herrera writes of a cross-country trip Noguchi took with Armenian-American painter Arshile Gorky. The two of them got into a verbal spat when Gorky related a story about what a cloud in the sky looked like. Noguchi insisted it was “just a cloud.”

“A self-addressed envelope, if you are inclined to brood, raises deep questions of identity,” Renata Adler writes in her 1976 novel Speedboat. “Such an envelope, immutably itself, is always precisely where it belongs.” Noguchi’s relationship to art can be understood in these terms. As a child, he collected rocks among blue mountain flowers to retain a sense of heaviness and constancy. As a grown man, he was openly unresolved regarding his identity outside art.

WHILE NOGUCHI TURNED himself in at Poston on his own volition, it quickly became clear that he would not be allowed to leave voluntarily. It is vital to distinguish between historical categories of captivity, from slavery to imprisonment. What unites them in embodied reality, however, is the severing of social ties. Japanese-American internment was abetted by that peculiar carceral order: a caste system, which in the camps drew from three main groups: the Issei, or Japanese immigrants; the Nisei, or American-born children of Japanese parents; and the Hakujin, or “white ones,” who oversaw the camp. Noguchi took note of the “deep cleavage” between the first and second group, wincing that it ripped through bonds between child and parent. There was a less visible yet knowable fourth presence: Native Americans. Noguchi intimated in “I Become a Nisei,” that the fate of the internees at Poston lay not so much in their “cooperative self-help” as with the Bureau of Indian Affairs as “we are on Indian land.”

The enlistees’ new “homes” at Poston measured “20 x 25 feet of tar paper shack,” but these spartan conditions were not the worst of Poston’s deprivations. “Suddenly I became aware of a color line I had never known before,” Noguchi wrote. On his alienation in the camps, Noguchi noted that the administrators at Poston, some known to him before in civilian life, “seemed to change character” as managerial captors. He did not readily identify with the much younger Nisei, who faced their own degrees of estrangement: “They avoid the Japs and also the whites; they are alone. ‘I am an American,’ they say, ‘not used to so many Japanese faces.’”

Noguchi himself was at best seen as a famous (if reclusive) New York artist, at worst suspected of being an informer because of his perceived or actual channels of access to the administrative staff. An exhibition of Noguchi’s work, conceived prior to Pearl Harbor, opened at the San Francisco Museum of Art while Noguchi was in Poston. Hailed as “frighteningly versatile” by Alfred Frankenstein of the San Francisco Chronicle, Noguchi was not allowed to attend.

Prior to internment, Noguchi intuited that separation—as an artist, as a “Eurasian,” as a “third culture kid”—could be a means of power. After internment, he was “shook by separation imposed.” Social disconnection went from being a form of generative solitude to one of intolerable anguish, something registered directly in his writing. If before, his racially mixed status had been a form of identity confusion (or downright insult, as when the State Department called him a “half-breed”) it now became a rupture with all sides. Noguchi unquestionably longed for identification with Japanese-American internees, as life in the camps inspired solidarity. Of the administrative staff, he wrote that equality was impossible. “I became embarrassed in their presence.”

Noguchi’s plan to champion a cultural cause by educating and reviving traditional Japanese arts among the Nisei stalled, as the authorities did not want to encourage identification with Japanese culture, even as Noguchi sought to dilute its “war-like aspects.” He soon realized there would be no follow-through on the budget and resources he had been verbally promised. He improvised a letter-writing campaign to his artist-activist network and solicited price quotes for resources and tools. He was both visionary and practical in outlook: “We plan a city and look for nails.” He priced five hundred pounds of red clay, five hundred pounds of modeling clay, two sacks of plaster, one bale of fiber, and ten burlap sacks with the Italian Terra Cotta Company, which made no reference to the customer’s unusual return address in the Arizona desert: “Please send us your check for $39.00 and we will ship to you at once. And state whether you want the clay in the wet or dry form.” Despite dwindling or non-existent materials, Noguchi devoted his attention designing to a recreation facility, to be made of timber and adobe bricks, that would provide space for athletics and art. In an optimistic

Exhibition view, showing (left table), shaped wood components and found ironwood branches, ca. 1942–43, and (right) Untitled, 1943, driftwood, wood and wire, 23¼ inches tall. Photo Nicholas Knight.
memorandum for the project he wrote of its importance: “It will bring together activities which are now scattered and will strengthen a spirit of democratic participation” among evacuees.  

He also oversaw the carpentry, ceramics, and wood carving shops. It is possible to detect, even in the stilted tone of the project memorandum, Noguchi’s sensitivity to the affective power of landscape and organic matter on the incarcerated. His blueprints for an improved camp layout include a recreation area north of the football field and a Japanese garden to its south: “These buildings are to be orientated so as to face the northern park area and will be a retreat from the harsh symmetry [sic] of Poston.” In another surreal turn, the Farm Security Administration requested Noguchi’s plans.

Ultimately, the aim of the community art programs was to encourage internees to embrace their lost Japanese heritage. Were their works ever to be exhibited, such a show would humanize the creators, presenting them as fellow Americans to their counterparts outside the camp. But this approach may have been doomed from the start. Mobilizing art for a social cause will not dissolve the forces of intolerance and neofascism—but if it saves just one person, even if that person is the artist, it will not be futile.

The events of Pearl Harbor had turned Noguchi into a Nisei overnight, with artistic activities backgrounded. “With a flash I realized I was no longer a sculptor alone,” and no longer just a New Yorker or an American but a Japanese-American. Co-founding the Nisei Writers and Artists Mobilization for Democracy, Noguchi suddenly devoted himself in common cause to “stop the hysteria that was developing.” Defensive patriotism would convince the public that “WE ARE AMERICANS and we know that this is the American way . . . the democratic way. THIS AMERICA WE LOVE. This is the America for you and for me,” as one wartime statement of Japanese-American solidarity went. After incarceration at Poston, which he managed to leave on hard-won furlough, Noguchi vowed to relinquish activism. When he finally left, he had 475 pounds of materials shipped from the Arizona desert to New York. “The deep depression that comes with living under a cloud of suspicion, which we as Nisei experienced, lifted, and was followed by tranquility. . . I resolved henceforth to be an artist only,” he said. Nonetheless, he continued politically organizing among like-minded artists, and remained under constant FBI surveillance for another three years. 

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Isamu Noguchi quotes have been taken from letters and writings on display as part of the exhibition.
4. Ibid.
10. Quoted in Herrera, p. 175.
11. He expressed his motivation for going as “that I might contribute toward a rebirth of handicraft and the arts which the Niseis have so largely lost in the process of Americanization” in a letter to Mr. Fryer, July 28, 1942.
14. Ibid.
15. Quoted in Herrera, p. 173.
16. Ibid.
17. Quoted in Herrera, p. 184.