

Project Text: Noguchi Galaxy

Noguchi Galaxy

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My sculpture installation at PS 287 Queens is made up of two groups of hanging powder-coated aluminum forms. Version I is designed for the school's double-height entry and Version II is designed for the double-height volume in the third-floor library. The largest element in the lobby measures 168 x 142 cm and the large central form in the library group measures 244 x 84 cm. My goal has been to create a work that is pleasurable and humorous for the viewer, but with an enigmatic quality, open to interpretation. The work also relates to the history and culture of Queens borough, derived from the forms of the Queens-based sculptor, Isamu Noguchi (b. 1904, d. 1988). By selecting forms from the visual vocabulary of Noguchi, I hope to draw viewers' attention to his work and the era he lived in.

Isamu Noguchi was born in Japan but lived most of his life in the United States. His early artistic education was sporadic, but then started in earnest when he moved to Paris in 1927 and worked as an apprentice to Constantin Brancusi. When Noguchi returned to the US in the 1930s, he came under the influence of New Deal and Mexican social realism. Many artists in this period were trying to bring more social engagement to their practices by creating murals, sculptures, and reliefs for public sites. In the spirit of the times, Noguchi went to Mexico City and realized a large wall relief for a public market, still well-preserved today.

In the 1940s Noguchi returned to abstraction. He developed a repertory of flat graphic forms—an abstract vocabulary extrapolated from nature—and carved them in flat materials such as slate and thin marble slabs (imported from Europe for countertops and easily available from New York stone suppliers.) By slotting together these flat, fin-like forms at right angles he was able to construct free-standing sculptures.

But even as Noguchi was moving into pure abstraction, he continued to search for models of social engagement. His answer was to introduce utility into the art object, creating a series of functional works that blurred the boundaries between art and design. His Akiri paper lamp series and his famous coffee table, fabricated by Herman Miller (1945) are two examples.

Noguchi plotted his repertory of flat shapes on sheets of graph paper as if designing an alphabet or developing a new musical notation. These forms, put to use in his furniture, sculpture, and his first playground designs, influenced American design in the following decades. They were part of the source code for post-war biomorphic modernism. His early formal vocabulary was so *of its era* that it still evokes the spirit of the immediate post-war period.

This is the historical period I have been studying for the past ten years. It is a period of massive contradictions: large quasi-socialist public infrastructure and building projects were carried out against the backdrop of the Cold War and rise of McCarthyism. I'm interested in the progressive aspects of this period, a kind of golden age for US public architecture: housing, schools, cultural and diplomatic buildings. Postwar optimism combined with what I like to call the post-war New Deal "hangover" to fuel a period of ambitious public works (including an expanded New York City school construction program.) *Noguchi Galaxy* is designed in homage to this era.

On the artistic front, the post-war period was a time when artists placed abstract works in dialogue with the abstract forms of architecture. A good example is Barbara Hepworth's 20-foot bronze, *Single Form*, installed in front of the UN building. Hepworth believed that abstract forms, rather than pictorial or representational forms, are the ideal tools for the expression of abstract ideas. She viewed abstract art as potentially the most political art, and recognized the complex conversation that could result from the juxtaposition of abstract sculpture and architecture.

I am evoking Noguchi's forms because for me they represent this moment of post-war experimentation and social progress. The work I am creating for PS 287 is conceptually complex, yet emotionally accessible, offering many points of entry. It is also a very personal work, based on my fundamental definition of sculpture. When I attempt to trace what has influenced me in my work, I fantasize being able to jump into the mysterious rabbit hole of intuition and retrace it to its source. Once arrived, I would encounter a floating dreamscape of disembodied sculpture fragments from Hepworth, Calder, Moore, Noguchi... a whole galaxy of forms, like a celestial map of the unconscious.