

Images of Miyazaki: The Artistic Contributions of George Sugarman and Shin'ichi Okada

Ruth K. Meyer

Borrowed scenery is a landscaping term frequently found in the literature on the Japanese garden. It takes its most evident meaning from the fact that not every location is ideal and often one must capitalize on the best use of what is available. The newly arrived westerner must frequently adjust to the cultural shock of finding the most idyllic private gardens in the most unforgiving of urbanized atmospheres. Like the Japanese, slowly one learns to see the beautiful and ignore the ugly and to anticipate the deliberate orchestration of sensations one finds in a place like the new Prefecture Cultural Park of Miyazaki.

Located on the westernmost Japanese island of Kyushu, the city of Miyazaki is striving to catch up as a cultural center equal to the other prefecture capitals. With little more than a century of influential political history behind it the city of 300,000 on the east coast of Kyushu is endeavoring to regain some of its lost luster as a tourist destination. Before the inflation of the bubble economy in the 1980s, Miyazaki was described as the Miami of Japan with a modest resort community dependent on its small offshore island of Aoshima. Now in an attempt to lure tourists back from the admittedly more attractive beaches of Hawaii or Australia, Miyazaki government and private developers have built a new oceanfront resort community, Seagaia, which offers the Ocean Dome, the world's largest indoor beach set in an exotically computerized waterpark. From a control booth high above synthetic sands technicians control not only the time of day, but also the ebb of the tides, the roll of the surf, the hourly eruption of a nearby volcano and other theme park amenities borrowed from tropical beaches.

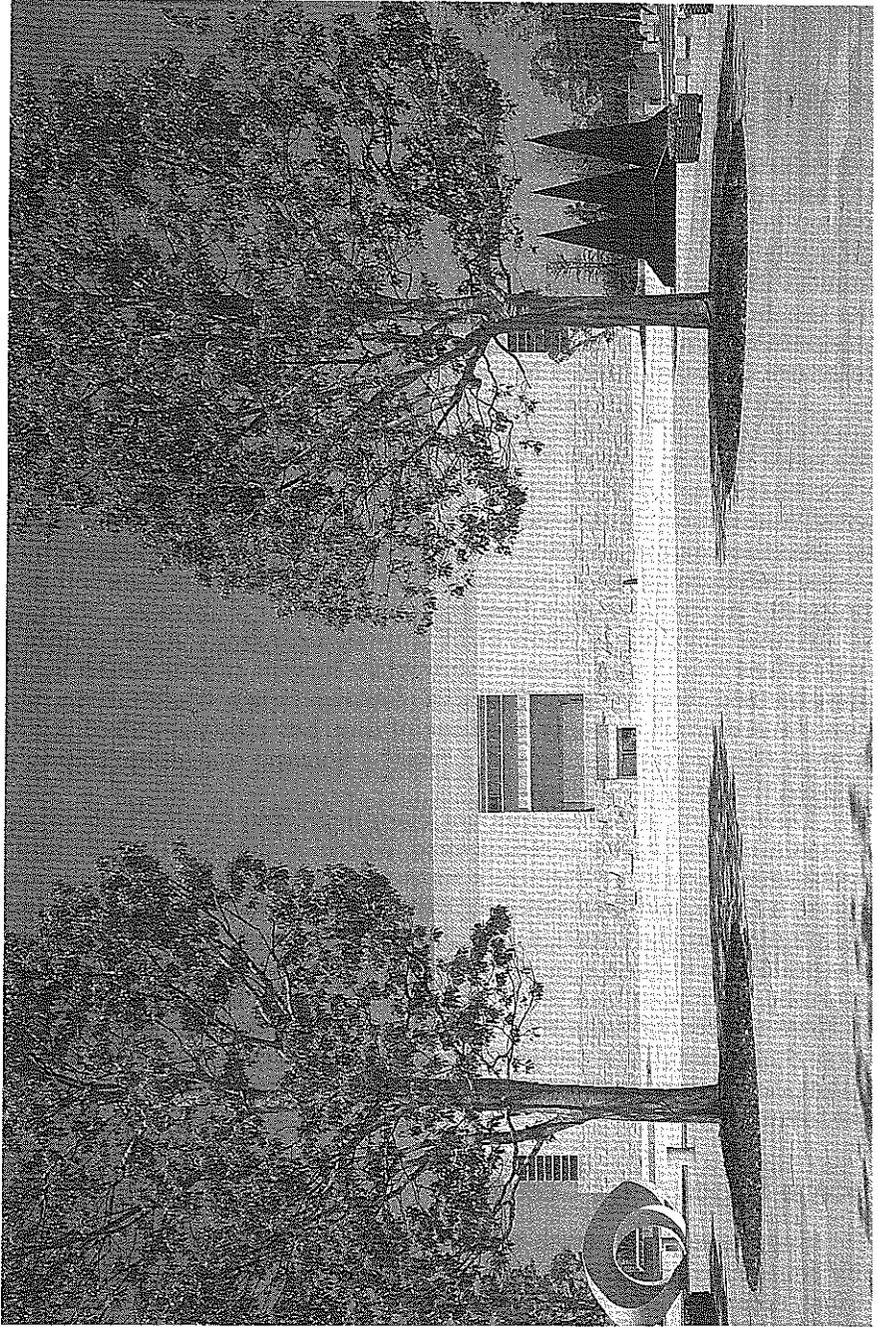
Downtown Miyazaki has not been neglected by these recreational initiatives and has also undergone a renaissance. North of the city's center and adjacent to its largest shrine, the prefecture's new cultural district has been created. Braced between a large, well-stocked public library on the north and an immense performing arts complex on the south a new fine arts museum opened in October 1995. These three buildings enclose a monumental courtyard enframed on three sides leaving the eastern borders open to a plaza and reception zone for pedestrians arriving by bus or car. Here to receive them they will find a "social sculpture" by the American artist, George Sugarman.¹ The designation is the artist's own and implies his wish for his art . . . that it will find its greatest acceptance among the park's visitors who will enjoy it most frequently.

George Sugarman's Career

Sugarman's selection to be the artist for the Miyazaki Prefecture Cultural Park sculpture represents one more achievement in a growing list of successful outdoor commissions which began at El Segundo, California in 1967. The artist's transition from wood to metal, from natural textures to polychromed planes was made just at the beginning of a brief but significant golden age for American public

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Miyazaki Prefecture Cultural Park



art. Earlier in the decade of artistic ferment that followed upon the fading glow of Abstract Expressionist painting Sugarman had established his reputation with a second prize win at the 1961 Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh. Beating out the much better known American, David Smith, finishing just behind the even more famous Swiss sculptor, Alberto Giacometti, Sugarman introduced himself with *Six Forms in Pine, Blue, Black and White*, his first sculpture using more than one family of forms. Sugarman's departure from the unitary creative gesture, his introduction of multi-partite, flexible arrangements of sculptural components arose from a period of study and experimentation begun ten years earlier in Paris where he had gone to study sculpture.

Sugarman was born in 1912, in the Bronx, New York to parents who were involved in the arts both financially and creatively. His father was an Oriental rug dealer and his mother was interested in music, so Sugarman's youthful appreciation of all that New York City had to offer—concerts, opera, Broadway, the museums—was encouraged. After he was graduated with a BA from New York City College in 1934, Sugarman was undecided about his opportunities for an artistic career and for a while taught arts and crafts for the WPA. A decision of sorts was thrust on him when he was drafted and joined the Navy serving in the Pacific theater.

After the Navy Sugarman spent six more years working while taking evening art classes at the Museum of Modern Art. Finally, his lifetime of looking and thinking about all the arts inspired Sugarman to go to Paris and study sculpture. There he would find the sources of the modern movement in the post-war revival of the School of Paris. In 1951-52, Sugarman studied with the Cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine. His work with Zadkine represented the only formal sculpture training he had.

By the time he got to Paris, Sugarman felt that sculpture would be his life's work and he enjoyed the atmosphere of the postwar art capital where other former G.I.s studied at the facilities of the Academie de la Grande Chaumière. There he made his first floor sculpture in 1953 doing away with the concept of poising his work upon a base or pedestal so as to isolate it spatially. With this move to the floor his transition to multi-part sculptures was determined and new dimensions of scale and space opened up for him.

Sugarman underwent a further awakening to the possibilities for modern sculpture. Visits to the great architectural monuments and particularly those of the 16th—and 17th—century Baroque period made profound impressions during his years in Europe. Roman Baroque architect-sculptors like Bernini and Boromini, the designers of great civic monuments and ornamental piazzas, showed him how to extend the space for modern sculpture and give it new social meanings. Travels to Spain brought further insights. In both the textured riches of Gaudi's Barcelona Cathedral and the Catalan artist's Park Güell. Sugarman saw color used lavishly in public sculpture. His visual experiences of monumental European art spaces took seed to flower later in simple pieces made of wood and in his first social sculptures.

Sugarman received his first commission for a site-specific sculpture from the First National Bank of St. Paul, Minnesota in 1968. The previous year he had begun to work in painted metal with the commission for *From Yellow to White to Blue to Black* to be installed in the plaza of the Xerox Building at El Segundo, California in 1970. The new decade, which brought worldwide interest to contemporary American sculpture, enlarged Sugarman's opportunities to show the work he had been making in his studio since winning the Carnegie prize. His first European retrospective, exhibition which started in Basel, traveled to Leverkusen and Berlin and finished at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Thanks to this international exposure, a series of new commissions followed and Sugarman found himself firmly established in the field of American public art through works in Detroit, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

The primary and motivating force behind the development of public sculpture in the late sixties and early seventies was the United States Government. Funding for outdoor art flowed through the National Endowment for the Arts and the General Services Administration, custodians of the many new government buildings erected all over the nation. Sugarman encountered the first resistance to his developing notion of social sculpture in Baltimore when his 1975 General Service Administration commission for the plaza of the Baltimore Federal Center was condemned by a Federal judge who upon viewing the model, pronounced that the work would be a "potential shelter for persons bent on mischief or assault on the unsuspecting." Sugarman had proposed a sequence of polychromed steel forms that would culminate in an openwork gazebo structure within which a federal worker might have taken shelter from the sun on a blazingly hot Maryland day. A series of revisions to the design and months of public hearings and private negotiations finally permitted installation of *People's Sculpture* to go forward.

Sugarman's new more architectural aspirations were only slightly compromised and he grew to understand the controversial role of monumental sculpture in the increasingly public debate over government funding for art. He wanted viewer participation in the space of his sculptures to be active. He wanted his sculptures to be walked through and sat upon as well as passively stared at. Whenever a potential commission came his way these were the principles he had to define to committees as well as defend.

Sugarman and Japan

Sugarman's first major Japanese commission came in 1993 and was for a group entitled *Portals* at the Crystal Towers development in the Harbor Land of Kobe. Thankfully, that work survived the Great Hanshin Earthquake which devastated the city on January 17, 1995. *Portals* consists of two large clusters of curvilinear elements that sit separated and opposed on raised plant covered terraces surrounded by office buildings. The larger and more flamboyant group is positioned just beside the street level access to a pair of escalators connecting to subterranean levels. Two immense lyrical shapes, perhaps wings, perhaps harps, rocked back but at rest on wave like bases seem poised to move forward again in a gesture of welcome to those arriving from below ground. Nearby, the second cluster is a more controlled spatial event, but no less welcoming for it offers an openwork canopy of curving blades that invites the pedestrian to walk into its enclosure. The profiles of the independent elements share certain measurements of heights and depths and just one color, a brilliant chrome yellow, has been used to signify the unity of the sculpture despite the disparity of the size of the greater and lesser parts and the distance between them. These choices give *Portals* a strong sense of formality and a more assertive presence within its generously scaled but still restricted site.

By contrast, his commission for a sculpture in front of the new Miyazaki Art Museum at first appeared boundless and offered an opportunity to Sugarman to dream and create with few limitations. The broad plaza of the Prefecture Park, enclosed on three sides by the imposing architecture of the Library, Performing Arts Center and Art Museum seemed to have been conceived to accommodate public celebrations and festivals and was ready to lend its space to the movement of great crowds from one event to another. To a New Yorker looking at the plans he'd been sent, the ensemble looked just a little bit like Lincoln Center. By the time Sugarman was awarded his commission, however, others had already begun to choreograph the movements that those crowds might perform. The architects, the planners, the landscapers had carved up the plaza impressing their discrete areas with formal statements of their own.

In the beginning, Sugarman thought that he had been commissioned to create a work for the stone-paved terrace immediately in front of the Art Museum. In the preliminary stages the lower story of that façade shown in the architect's plans seemed to offer a stately, relatively neutral rectilinear field against which a fanciful array of the colorful curvaceous forms associated with Sugarman's style would be shown to advantage. Doing some research on the Miyazaki region, Sugarman learned with interest of the ancient legends that locate here the prehistoric origins of the Imperial Family and the first Japanese emperor, Jimmu-tenno.

For a time Sugarman thought he might refer to the local mythology through the choice of certain emblematic or symbolic forms associated with the creation of the Japanese islands and the birth of their leaders. But this idea had to be abandoned when he learned that the architect, Shin'ichi Okada, had already chosen this subject and that he would use quasi-cyclopean stonework in the construction of the museum's portals to signify the opening to the cave of Amaterasu, the sun goddess and maternal ancestor of Jimmu.

Okada's Architectural Program

Okada's involvement in the project was, in fact, fortuitous for he demonstrated both the requisite experience and vision to handle this location. The immediate topography of the park site is continuously flat and potentially uninteresting. About 16.5 hectares of space has been cleared for the park within a mixed residential district distinguished only by its proximity to the densely wooded area of the nearby Miyazaki shrine park (also the site of the first Miyazaki Prefecture General Museum that will now undergo renovations). But despite its featurelessness, the new Prefecture Park does offer grand distant vistas of the mountains that surround the city to the north, west and south. Okada, therefore, elected both to elevate and isolate the fenestration of the east façade and borrow the mountain scenery for the views from major windows in the upper stories.

Okada makes his strongest architectural statement through his design for the east façade which fronts on the plaza. Here the ground level is articulated as a continuous mural surface broken only by the deeply recessed entrance portal, which pierces the stonework like the entrance to a cave. To remind the people further of their ancient cultural heritage as they enter their new museum, Okada used seemingly random-sized granite blocks laid in a pattern that can be compared to the stonework of the medieval castle foundations seen nearby at Obi-cho in Nichinan City or more impressively at Kumamoto.

Being on axis with the elements of the plaza, the formal entrance portal penetrates the museum's walls at ground level and functions with the fenestration above. Through this design the powers of natural light might have been restricted and concentrated within the building. Instead, Okada elected to open up the western façade to vistas of the park which offers a more informal terrain for picnicking and sports. Viewed from within the park the western façade displays many more windows and the very sculptural massing of some major building elements such as the two story block that contains a second-floor sculpture gallery and a first floor cafe. The cafe opens onto a concrete apron which appears to have been conceived as a spacious terrace restaurant except that in the heat of Southern Kyushu its useful time might be limited and outside of Tokyo the Japanese have not yet adopted formal *al fresco* dining preferring the more casual intimacy of *le déjeuner sur l'herbe*.

On each level the public areas reached by natural light are for visitors services and gatherings not for the display of works of art that could be damaged by the sun, no small concern in this sub-tropical climate. In its external metaphors the building is both castle and cave dominating its terrain both impassively and impressively. At

the groundline stone meets stone. The terrace pavings continue the material out to where alternating bands of grass and stone begin and lead to the central plaza area. This rectilinear pattern suggests another local landscape reference, the lines of the "washboard" coast from Aoshima Island down to Nichinan resulting from ancient volcanic activities.

Sugarman's Site

As the museum project moved from plans to construction it became apparent that the original commission awarded to Sugarman by prefecture government officials would have to be reconsidered. If placed in front of the main entrance to the museum the anticipated gaiety of his informal "social sculpture" would come into conflict with the majestic formal statement of the entrance contemplated by Okada. A new location within the Prefecture Cultural Park was needed in order to give Sugarman's sculpture space of its own to inhabit. The eastern approaches to the park's main entrance offered an ideal location since this would become the principal public access to the trio of cultural facilities. With most of the primary elements of his sculpture already in mind, Sugarman came to Miyazaki for the first time to claim the new site he had previously known only in plan. A meeting with Okada-san led to mutual a understanding that were endorsed by the Prefecture bureaucracy who had now to take custody of the work away from museum officials. The park is divided into spheres of influence and Sugarman's sculpture is now the responsibility of the park's administration.

Earlier it was said that Okada borrowed the scenery of the distant oceans and mountains of Kyushu for the vistas from the museum's enormous second story windows. Sugarman had been planning to borrow some scenery of his own. *Images of Miyazaki* relies above all upon the sun represented literally and figuratively. Sugarman's sun is a brilliant yellow oval surrounded in a blue nimbus of cloud as it appears to rise over the Pacific at dawn. Although the polychromed steel is firmly footed into the grass from a short distance away the form appears to float. Then, from a different vantage point the assembly of sun and cloud looks like an Ω , an *omega*. Sugarman personally offered that suggestion when describing the form saying that it for him it increased its symbolic value within the ensemble. Arrayed around the sun are four different families of forms. Some distance away is a range of jagged black peaks like the nearby mountain landscape. Closer in glossy green foliage sprouts out of the ground as a constant reminder of the verdant environment. Most audacious are the pale lavender and lettuce green floral designs on large tilted planes that are scattered nearby. These low lying sculptures seem to have been inspired from two sources: the flower beds that are profusely installed in Miyazaki, a city that wants to be the floral capital of Japan and the striking abstract patterns of light and shade that occur with no less frequency in local parks and gardens, thanks again, to the blazing sun. Sugarman's social sculpture is completed with a group of benches scattered like enormous blossoms around the edges of the central circular plaza. The least dramatic element, they are also the most important for they signal to the cautious Japanese that this sculpture is truly for them to use for their own pleasure. Seated on the benches parents can watch children scamper in out and over the rest of the forms as they take possession of these *Images of Miyazaki*.

Critical Responses

In the past year since their dedications neither work has been spared the censure of local critics. Some visitors find the museum building much too immense and overwhelming for the site while others protest of the brilliant nearly blinding light

that fills the public lobby and foyers to the galleries. Okada responds to the first objection by pointing to the scale of the flanking structures, the library and the performing arts center, and reminding critics that his commission was to bridge the space in a manner that would speak to the cultural aspirations of the entire building program. This he has done. As to the floods of brilliant light that fill the public spaces one might counter that they are intermittent phenomena. Despite its reputation as a sunshine capital Miyazaki has its numbers of gray days, too.

Sugarman's work, in its turn, is thought to be too small and critics say it appears lost within the site and dwarfed by Okada's museum. This sentiment is difficult to refute from looking at photographic evidence or a quick drive-by visit. A more generous budget would have been needed to enable Sugarman to rival Okada's own sculptural decisions. It can easily be said that Sugarman's work has done exactly what he planned for it to do. It is a social sculpture enjoyed mostly by those who live in the neighborhood and can visit frequently. They can use the flowery benches to contemplate the majestic cultural facilities of the park or simply share a quiet moment with a friend discussing their own images of Miyazaki.

Notes

¹ This article is based on lengthy conversations with George Sugarman in Miyazaki and New York City. These talks, which covered his career and the circumstances of this commission, began in September, 1994 and continued until the summer of 1995. Conversations with Shin'ichi Okada, the architect, began at the dedication of the park and Sugarman's sculpture in April, 1995 and continued when Okada visited Miyazaki International College in April, 1996.

Elsewhere, the career of George Sugarman has been documented most extensively in the catalogue for his retrospective organized by Holliday T. Day at the Joslyn Art Museum; *The Shape of Space, The Sculpture of George Sugarman*, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska in association with The Arts Publisher, Inc. New York, 1981. The Omaha publication contains a full chronology and bibliography.

The exhibition opened in Columbus, Ohio in 1982 and traveled to Philadelphia before its showing in Omaha. Following the showing in Ohio, Sugarman was commissioned to create a social sculpture for the plaza in front of the corporate headquarters of Chiquita Inc., in Cincinnati. This commission brought about our first meeting at the dedication of his sculpture *Cincinnati Spirit* in 1986. In Japan his career has been documented by publications of the gallery in Tokyo that shows his work. See *George Sugarman*, Contemporary Sculpture Center, Tokyo, November, 1993. This publication contains a statement by the artist and updates the previous biography and chronology.