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Noguchi's Playscapes

Saraleah Fordyce

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notions, which the curation introduced but could only gesture toward in the exhibition space. These include, for example, the complicated relationship between Sottsass' societal concerns and his work as a high-end commercial designer, or his exploration of ancient art in search of primary forms. Nevertheless, *Ettore Sottsass: Design Radical* affirmed the powerful legacy of a designer whose work and spirit go far beyond the stereotypes of that one red typewriter or the "80s kid" posts on our social media feeds.

Noguchi's Playscapes, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA, USA, July 15 – November 26, 2017

Reviewed by Saraleah Fordyce

Saraleah Fordyce is Adjunct Faculty at California College of the Arts.
sfordyce@cca.edu
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Isamu Noguchi is best known for his modern sculpture and furniture design that evolved from the 1920s through the late 1980s, his apprenticeship under Brancusi, his collaboration with Herman Miller, and his designs for Zenith Radio. This one-room show at SFMoMA focuses not on a style, form, period, or particular collaboration, but rather on the designer's fifty-year conceptual investigation into play and the relationship between sculptural settings and the body's movements. Many of the pieces were designed for public spaces. Noguchi believed in public design as a tool capable of challenging and expanding forms of interaction. In the models, drawings, sculptures, games, and props that were on view, Noguchi critiques prescriptive designs that narrow both conceptual and bodily pathways.

The exhibition welcomed the viewer with floor to ceiling black and white photos of Noguchi in his studio and a playscape – spaces, objects, and situations designed for play – in situ (Figure 1). Inside the main room ideas took shape, manifesting in an array of landscape architecture maquettes, two-dimensional proposals and drawings, objects that function as both models and sculptures, a chess set and table, nearly ceiling-high structures made for dancers, and black and white photos of people interacting with Noguchi's realized playscapes (Figure 2). The photos and the people in them felt dated, yet the settings futuristic, like history's vision of freedoms yet to come. Each work was surrounded by ample space, allowing every piece to stand as distinctive evidence of Noguchi's quest to advance new conversations between human bodies and designed forms.



Figure 1

Noguchi's Playscapes, 2017 (installation view, SFMOMA). Photo: Katherine Du Tiel.

Many of the designs on display were never realized. Their proposed freedom and flexibility of use made them dangerous or impractical. Drop offs without railings and sweeping arcs of tilting ground appear inspired but were, in reality, impossible. For example, the drawings and maquettes presented to New York City, but rejected by Robert Moses, offer us a peek into Noguchi's experience of hopeful offers met with bureaucratic limitations. Noguchi's proposals for large outdoor spaces are characterized by big, semi-spherical mounds, unconventional steel bars and swings, and symmetrical ramps that overhang empty centers large enough to hide under. These features imbue the playscapes with a sense of limitlessness. The show mixed the magic of these unrealized plans with the temperance of built ones. *Play Structure*, designed ca. 1975 and fabricated in 2017, was installed outside the museum, in the Howard Street corridor (Figure 3). Its undulating, circular tube suspended a few feet off the ground embodies the tension between invitation and ambiguity. It beckons a climber but prescribes no game. That



Figure 2

Noguchi's Playscapes, 2017 (installation view, SFMOMA), Photo: Katherine Du Tiel.



Figure 3

Isamu Noguchi, *Play Sculpture*, ca. 1975, fabricated 2017. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel, courtesy of The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York.

is left up to the hands or mind of the discoverer (though an accompanying sign warned, "You are welcome to play on this sculpture. Please use caution. Children must be supervised by an adult").

Set design commissions gave Noguchi freedom to experiment with flexible pieces intended for controlled spaces. Work for collaborators and friends like Martha Graham, Erick Hawkins, and Merce Cunningham held the center of the exhibition installation, giving a physical and historical specificity and concreteness that balanced the more speculative nature

of the proposals, sketches, and maquettes along the walls. *Jungle Gym*, designed for Hawkins' 1947 show *Stephen Acrobat*, is an assemblage of metal bars and primary colors in a form that is somewhere between a cubist painting of a ladder with off-kilter planes, and a Calder mobile made stable enough to climb. Like the rest of the exhibit, the works made for dancers were an invitation for the interactive body to engage in a temporal performance.

The exhibit presented Noguchi as a proto-speculative designer who conceived the user as an active agent rather than an auto-performer. He designed spaces both whimsical and solid, inviting and perplexing. It was a small exhibition, without a catalog, elevator banner, or audio tour. But its message was an important reminder of the possibility of holding contradictions within single works, and of how proposing radical alternatives to everyday pathways and making work for a generously imagined user is a form of social gift.