

# California Scenario

Costa Mesa, California

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996, 2024

## Notes on the Making of the Photographs

California Scenario by sculptor Isamu Noguchi is a work of public art in an office park, that was funded by Henry Segerstrom, the developer of the property. The site was once part of the family's large agricultural holdings in Orange County. Segerstrom gave Noguchi, who was born in Los Angeles, the freedom to design the setting, as well as the sculptural pieces in an 80m x 80m courtyard. The space is framed by two fifteen-story reflective glass office buildings and is completed with an L-shaped parking garage. The only access to the site is through narrow passages between buildings and from the lobbies of the office buildings and parking garage (1,3).

Upon entering the courtyard, the viewer is in a well-defined, square-shaped architectural space with a neutral frame made by twelve meter high stucco walls along the faces of the garage (12-16). This adds to its allure because it is without distractions from the surrounding urban context of Costa Mesa. Noguchi worked within this controlled environment to make an allegorical landscape of California's ecoregions using the most basic elements: earthen mounds, stones, water and plants. He located trees on mounds to filter and diminish views toward the office buildings (5-7,10-11). The central feature of the plan is an abstracted stream corridor that meanders just below the level of large, irregularly-shaped sandstone paving slabs that form a horizontal plane or datum, upon which the sculptural forms are positioned (15-18). Water passes under several

stones at strategic locations for crossing (8-9). The origin of the water course is an upright stone triangle with a sluice falling along the diagonal (8,12-13). A large gravel mound includes the striking silhouettes of desert plants seen against the stucco walls (14-16). Another sloped mound has native grasses framed by enormous redwoods of Northern California (5-7). A third mound has steep slopes with honeysuckle vines capped by a rectangular-shaped granite slab (9). In addition, upright natural stones cast long shadows over the floor of the courtyard in the morning and evening hours (17).

Since its opening in 1982, there has been extensive analysis and reviews of this internationally acclaimed project. Most of the interpretations tend to focus on how each of the sculptural elements represents a specific region of California, however this is perhaps a too literal interpretation of the work. While the idea of referencing ecoregions was certainly the genesis of California Scenario, it diminishes the more forceful and expressive affects of the experience of the whole courtyard. In the short film titled *Noguchi in His Own Words*, he says "Sculpture exists only to give meaning to the space. As far as sculpture is concerned, it should be invisible in a sense. You are not even aware of it. It is subliminal. You don't realize it, but it is like a voice that is so high pitched that you don't hear it, but you are still conscious of it. You are affected by it."\*

It may be elusive to assess how an artist works, but I don't believe Noguchi was assembling a collection of symbols of the geographic regions of California when composing the site. The stones or other sculptural pieces are not the primary experience of this environment; it is the composition of the whole which is the work of art that eludes description in words and conveys feelings, emotions and an intuitive understanding of California. The courtyard comes to life as a mythical landscape. Most visitors walk through California Scenario without the references to ecoregions, however they feel the exhilaration in the aesthetic qualities of the whole arrangement. It has a psychological attraction that encourages long contemplation. His approach to sculpture is described in Noguchi's own words, "One learns through the process of making. You can find out how to do something and then do it, or do something, and then find out what you did. I tend to be of the second disposition. I just do it and then will try to name it."

How does the idealized space of California Scenario differ from a sculpture garden with a collection of distinct pieces, typically by different artists? Philosopher of art and aesthetics Susanne Langer distinguishes sculpture from architecture and painting as a medium that commands a virtual space around an object or piece. It is a volume with a perceptual space that is beyond what the figure actually occupies. The sculptural forms of the distinctive mounds, stones and watercourse at California Scenario each command their own virtual

space, however these virtual spaces or volumes around the varied forms are designed to interact and overlap in the composition so that the viewer experiences a profound sense of immersion within an expressive environment. California Scenario transcends being a sculptural garden to become an environment within its own distinctive spatial domain, that has characteristics intrinsic to architecture and landscape architecture. The place created in this harmonious world in a courtyard by Noguchi has the virtual spaces of architecture and landscape architecture complimenting sculpture - to overcome the sometimes deep divisions among the arts. This can be seen in his wooden model of California Scenario at the Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, New York, that appears as a single unified composition of beautiful abstract forms.\*\*

I first photographed the site in 1996 and again in 2024. In a documentary effort, I highlighted the components of Noguchi's composition by framing views to give clarity and focus to the sculptural elements in the appropriate light to reveal their three dimensionality. That is followed by panoramic views that show the experience of the ensemble of forms and the designed relationships between the shapes. The earlier views have dramatic darks and lights to highlight the sculpture (13), however the latter views reduce the contrast and are more serene. They are flatter and quieter, and perhaps more revealing in capturing the spirit of the place.

# List of Photographs

1. Fountain at end of the entry from the street, 2024
2. View west of fountain and office building, 2024
3. View after entering from the parking garage, 1996
4. Spirit of the Lima Bean, 2024
5. Mound with redwoods, 2024
6. Seating on mound with redwoods, 2024
7. View south from mound with redwoods, 2024
8. Stream, stones and triangle, 2024
9. Stream and mound at office building entry, 2024
10. Mound with granite slab, bench and grove, 2024
11. Grove, 2024
12. Stone, triangle and stream, 2024
13. View east of triangle, 1996
14. Desert mound and garage walls, 2024
15. View east of stream, triangle and desert mound, 2024
16. View south of stream and triangle, 2024
17. View east of stream and stones, 2024
18. Stream and crossing, 2024
19. View west from parking garage roof, 2024











































# Notes

## Selected Publication of the Photographs:

*Land Forum*, cover image, Fall/Winter 1997

Ward, Alan, *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation*, 1998

Ward, Alan, "Time After Time," *Garden Design Journal*, June/July 2002

\* Video produced by the Barbican Centre, London, 2021 from historic interviews with Noguchi, who died in 1988

\*\* Philosopher of art and aesthetics Susanne Langer in her book *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* describes at length the modes of virtual space, including sculpture, which she distinguishes from architecture and painting as a medium that commands a virtual space around an object or piece. It is a volume with a perceptual space that is beyond what the figure actually occupies. Langer also makes a distinction between discursive and presentational symbols. It is relevant to California Scenario, because the interpretation of the work as a collection of pieces representing California's ecoregions is using discursive symbols, or language, to explain its meaning successively in a linear fashion, describing one sculptural piece after another. However, California Scenario should be considered a presentational symbol, like all works of art - experienced as a whole and communicating in a nonverbal way that discursive symbols cannot.