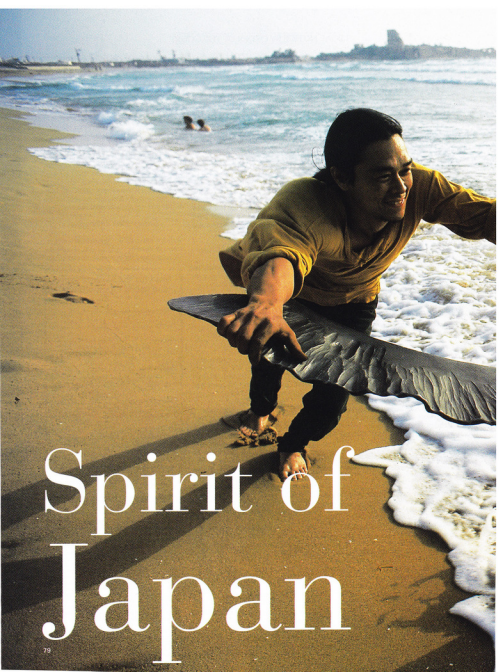


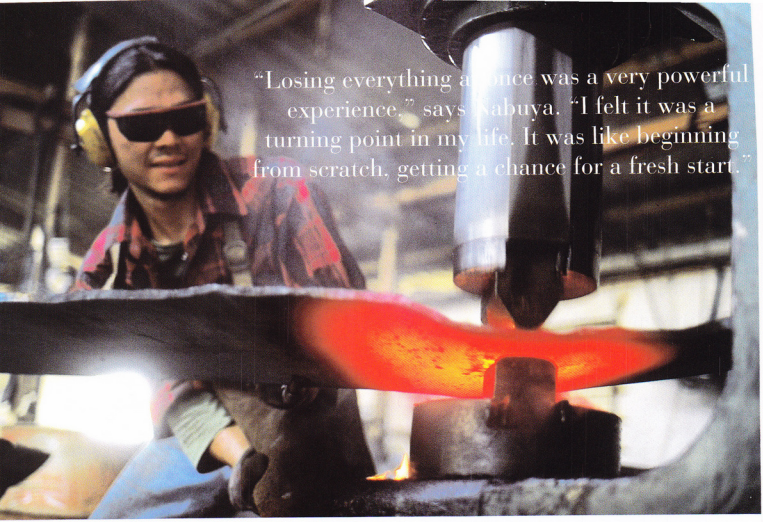
Spirit of Japan

Israeli artist

"I work with nature's most basic elements — metal, stone, wood," says Nabuya Yamaguchi, a Japanese artist who lives and works in Israel.

"It is important that people, besides experiencing the work visually, will also connect to it on a more sensual plane. In my work, I try to express the idea of time, and how it consumes everything. Everything around us will be swallowed by time and return to nature."

By TAL AGMON Photos TAL GLUCK



Nabuya (35) lives with his family in Ein Hod, an artists village near the sea about 40 minutes north of Tel Aviv. He came to Israel for love for a woman. He met his Israeli wife Shir, 36, when he was an art student in Japan. She was 21, just out of military service and on the traditional young Israelis' grand tour of the Far East.

Shir is the daughter of a prominent Israeli artist who was interested in studying art and who came by chance to see a student exhibition at Nabayu's art school.

They met and fell in love and for three years the lived together in Japan. They traveled often to Naples, working together, and creating clay portraits of people they met in the streets.

Shir was meantime moving to a serious study of Zen Buddhism. She entered a secluded convent for a year and a half, during which the rigorous rules forbade the couple to meet. While Nabuya waited, he consoled himself with an occasional letter he was permitted to send Shir, and with creating a huge bell for the convent.

After Shir left the convent, the couple decided to return to Israel so that Shir could begin serious art studies. They arrived in 1989 and settled in Kibbutz Sdot Yam where Nabuya could apprentice himself to an Israeli artist, Ya'el Artzi, who works with marble.

After six months the couple moved to Haifa and Nabuya began exploring his own voice as an artist. "At university I was sure I wanted to be a sculptor," he says. "I wanted to work hard physically – to actually carve my sculptures from very simple raw materials.

Nabuya working in his studio. He melts the metals and then pounds them into an artistic form.

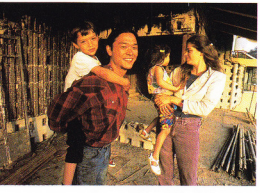
"I realized that iron is a good material to work with in Israel. It's very suitable to the climate and also to the architectural style, because most buildings are made of stone. In Japan, iron is used only rarely in interior decorating and sculpture because the architectural style is softer."

The couple's own dwelling in Haifa was somewhat basic – they had gas but no electricity. Nabuya began collecting tools and out of necessity he got used to working with limited facilities over an open fire.

"It wasn't easy," he admits. "I had no money and knew absolutely no one. Luckily, Israelis are intrigued by Japanese culture and I began getting commissions."

Nabuya loves working with stone. "Israeli stone is wonderful – immensely varied in many gorgeous light colors. I made furniture of iron combined with stone. It was fun, but not very commercial because I did everything the old-fashioned way – by hand."

Nabuya's breakthrough year came in 1992. Tired of the functional straitjacket of building furniture, he created an environmental sculpture for that year's Ein Hod festival. He then took part in several group exhibitions – in Herzliya



Museum, the Haifa Maritime Museum, and finally, at an international exhibition in England where Nabuya Yamaguchi represented Israel. The couple had become four - Roy is now 7 and Sumi 4 - and the family moved to a house in Ein Hod. One of the first high points in Nabuya's career was when he won the competition to design the gates to Ein Hod. Nabuya persuaded a reluctant kibbutz to let him convert some of their old hen houses into a studio. This was a success and other artists soon followed, creating a working community. Studios of painters, sculptors and goldsmiths line a grassy square decorated with many beautiful sculptures.

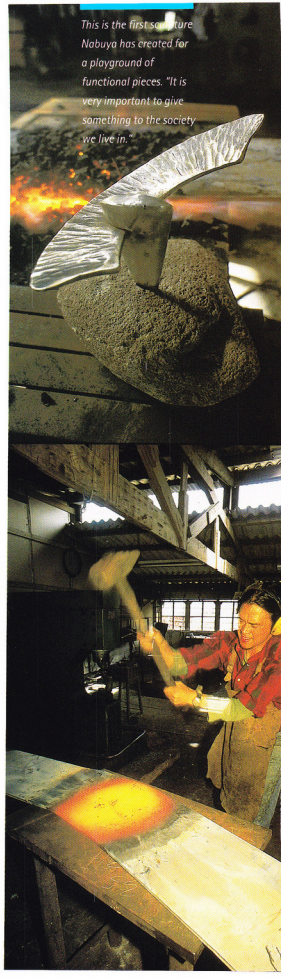
In Nabuya's old-world studio, all the tools are lovingly crafted by hand. In the center stands a huge stove where his different metals are forged. Nabuya melts the metals and then pounds them it into artistic form. He is assisted by two young men from the kibbutz who have become his apprentices.

In October 1998, while the Yamaguchis were visiting relatives in Japan, a fire raged through Ein Hod. Their house was completely destroyed, all their possessions burned.

"Losing everything at once was a very powerful experience," says Nabuya. "I felt it was a turning point in my life. It was like beginning from scratch, getting a chance for a fresh start. I felt that up until that point, I had been doing too much commercial work. I felt now I had to work for myself, to do what I wanted. That's when I thought of the children's playground."

The sculpture in the photographs is the first that Nabuya has created for a playground of functional pieces. The playground doesn't yet have a site or financial backing, but Nabuya hopes these will be found and that other artists will contribute to the project.

"I think it is very important to give something to the society we live in," he says. "What I love about the idea of the playground is that when you play with something, you really experience it. You become awakened to form and movement. I hope someday this sculpture will stand in a playground, and kids will swing on the wing, and feel like they are flying."



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