

A CULTURE IN PAPER

Sewing the invisible, a hand-made work... this is art according to Jum Nakao!

Of Japanese origin but born and raised in San Paolo, Jum Nakao is an international artist who unites his Brazilian spirit with Oriental philosophy. A perfect marriage that transpires through his extravagant and original works, designed and conceived to transmit deep messages that make one reflect on the value of the invisible.

"Here is my secret. It is very simple: one sees well only with the heart. The essential is invisible to the eyes"... "The essential is invisible to the eyes", the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember. The Little Prince, by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

Maura Leonardi

Perini Journal interviewed the artist in his atelier in San Paolo; a meeting which, for a few hours, transported us in a different dimension where the value of the invisible takes shape.

Perini Journal (PJL): What does creativity mean for you?

Jum Nakao (JN): Creativity is the ability to mix the influence of what surrounds us, of the environment, of people, of behaviors. It's like looking at ourselves in the mirror for a minute and capturing the emotion of that very moment. Being creative means being connected not with materials but with people, with those observing your works. Interaction with observers, with people, with their moods, is fundamental, otherwise creativity becomes nothing. Being creative means listening, interacting, having an emphatic behavior towards the world and society.

Sensitivity is one of the key elements. There are many works that are aesthetically important and unique from an architectural point of view, but maybe they cannot transmit emotions because they are cold. I think - and this is my conceptual philosophy - that creativity is strictly connected to people's feelings, to their perceptions, to emotions and not simply to the use of particular or refined materials. Creating a work leads you to try and interact with people, with the human aspect of the work itself, with the emotions and the meaning of your art. It's like the use of words and the meaning of what we want to express.

The content of our communication is the essence of communication itself. When you decide what you want to transmit, you choose the most appropriate words; for me, the same is true for the concept of creative art: the road it must be traveled is that of a close rapport with humans.

PJL: For you, how important is it to experiment, mix and use alternative materials for the creation of your models?

JN: For me, transversal and interactive language represents an inexhaustible and indispensable source for my creations. The hybrid is a fundamental component of my art. Mixing languages, habits and cultures is essential; it is an instrument that leads people to touch the real sense of things. The human ability to understand is not only aimed at one focus concept, but there are different ways to interpret and understand the things that are happening, the works of art. An example is my own nature and my life experience, my origins. I am Japanese but I was born and raised in Brazil. My grandparents arrived in 1920 and you can say that I am a Japanese product born in Brazil! I feel more Brazilian than Japanese, even though my physical aspect confirms my Asian origins and I have received an education based on Japanese principles influenced by Brazilian culture. My Japanese instinct manifests itself in several different situations, but my main culture basin has been Brazil. That's why I feel that contamination, mixing, the union of cultures, being multi-medial, multicultural and multi-linguist is the essence of my art form. In every work, in every artistic moment, people have to be influenced by different sensations.

When we drink a cup of coffee, for example, we experience its taste, its warmth, we see its color and we remember its taste and the moment we drank it. We perceive different emotions in one moment. That's why in my creations the concept of interacting becomes fundamental and predominant. Interaction is the key factor in our lives, a crucial one in my opinion, when I cook, when I drive, in every exhibit of mine. When I am working on a new exhibit, I try to involve and reproduce all of man's perceptions. This is the reason why I love to experiment with new materials and have people connect with something that tries to arouse emotions, making them discover or rediscover things that maybe surround their everyday lives but that they cannot see because their eye is not curious.

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In my works I try and arouse the observer by making sure he or she sees them through a different view, like a child with a yearning for discovery. Children are curious by nature and see everything with an attentive eye, always ready to discover, to seek and they love all that is new and never get bored but always have an air of surprise for everything they see. Unfortunately, growing up we lose the ability to discover and to express surprise at things... because our sensitivity in regards to the outside world is reduced.

PJL: You collaborated with Nike and with Nespresso. What do you think about this experience to combine, unite art with an industrial product - or actually - with two brands?

JN: It was a pleasurable adventure that began through their own initiative, because they both invited me to develop a new relationship between product and customer through my art. For Nespresso I created a large window display where the images were built through colored pixels; unique, untraditional pixels because we were working with coffee capsules. The essence of the display was that it was based on the digital concept construed through a mechanical system. The images were continuously changing and the mechanical approach constituted the real novelty. The basic philosophy of my work was the use of digital images built in mechanical form using the coffee capsules that consumers see in front of their eyes on a daily basis, attributing a different value to the capsules themselves after their use. I wanted to show consumers that even after use, the capsules have a life, they are not useless and can also perform another function, they have a high potential for use.

For Nike I created a collection where I tried to establish a connection with the different production methods of the materials. Nike is renowned for being always in the vanguard in the quest for new materials perfect for sports enthusiasts, and for its ability and inclination to renewal in the realm of the finished product, consistently offering new and unique products. Starting from these bases, I have tried, through my work, to unite the concept of Nike not only with the message of cutting-edge and capability to innovate, but also the ability to know people by trying to make them approach this important name.

An undisputed aspect of Brazilian culture is the ability to be creative and to find a quick and autonomous way to solve problems. In Brazil, there is the word "ginga": it's the Brazilian swing where the movement of the body is very instinctive and is given by intuition; body language is predominant. And it is indeed body language that takes on such importance as to synthesize how the process can be humanized. "Ginga" is an example, a metaphor of how Brazilians always succeed in finding the right solution, instinctively.

And the industrial process can be humanized, too. In these last few years, the use of machines has led to automation with the advantage of certainly being faster, more efficient and more productive. Machines guarantee optimal results but they produce without a soul; products no longer have a soul. Instead, man personalizes what he makes. The high level of technological development has led us to series productions - all the same, devoid of their own personality - while man is capable of humanizing and personalizing production. This was my objective.

Through the creations that I produced for Nike and for Nespresso, it was vital to develop the projects as a "breaking away" moment where I made these two industries interact with people's daily lives, creating a clear message in which people make machines better, enhancing not the aspect of productivity or of efficiency, but the emotional aspect of the work of man.

Walter Benjamin once said that "man cannot make machines human". I don't agree, because I think that what can be made human is the relationship between brand and consumers through contact between these two identities and through communication that possesses a soul. All my works, my exhibits try to transmit to my viewers that the work they are observing is a hand-made work, hence it's not perfect... just like human nature cannot be perfect. That's why I think my works transmit emotions that give form to that which is invisible.

PJL: What was the spirit behind the creation of the work called "A costura do Invisível"?

JN: "A costura do Invisível", the art of sewing the invisible, is a work that stems from the reflection of the society we live in. A society that is surely fast and frenetic where everybody is in a hurry! We are losing the meaning and the essence of the concept that lies behind every single thing. People do not ask themselves what are the concepts that lie behind the creation of things, they have lost the concept of the invisible, of what we cannot see, of the work that has led to a certain result.

So I decided to create something that would make people reflect on the importance of the invisible, on what we cannot see, and that at the same time, was capable of transmitting values. I chose paper because it is a material that is familiar to everyone; it becomes yellow with the passing of time; it is easy to find and above all it can take on meaning. A white sheet of paper doesn't have all this meaning, but if we start writing on it, drawing on it, for us it assumes a unique, symbolic significance. With paper we can do anything we want to. Projects are born on paper but no one can read what's not written on them.

Paper is also an ephemeral material that lends itself well to the creation of a fashion apparel collection. During

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Fashion Week 2004 in San Paolo, no one expected to see a collection of paper fashion apparel which was then destroyed at the end. For me, it was a one-of-a-kind emotion and the reactions were absolutely unexpected. In life there are many things we do not bestow value on, realizing their importance when we lose them, understanding their intrinsic, invisible value to which we never paid attention before, thus understanding what lies behind each individual thing. That's the way it is with human relations, too: we realize how much a person meant to us only in the moment that we lose that person. It was the same for me during this exhibit.

At the end of the fashion show, I stopped to speak with journalists who could not understand why I had destroyed these beautiful pieces. What is visible is important, but what is invisible is all the more so. My work was an example of style to underscore the importance of what lies behind things using a simple language that anyone can understand, because everyone understands international non-written language. The title of my work was and is a mere provocation that highlights the need to stop a minute and reflect on the importance of what surrounds us.

PJL: This project seems to express how paper can constitute a means to change some things in the world.

JN: Paper is a ductile and flexible material that has many possibilities of use for artists, industry, architecture etc. You can draw on paper and write projects on paper. Through paper, you can share your imagination, your plans and ideas with others. For me, everything starts off with paper, which is an instrument used and understood by everyone. Every project begins on paper.

PJL: What is the meaning of the use of wigs in the Playmobil characters used in your exhibit?

JN: When, as children, when we play with Playmobil characters, we can be princes, princesses, firefighters. We can play with our imagination and be anything we want to be. Play transports us into other worlds where we have never been before and we can imagine we are anyone at all. For me, the Playmobil characters were the key to access the world of fairytales. In my exhibit, I wanted to play; I wanted people to play around with their imagination and to be transported inside the fairytale to make them reflect, again. I willingly used Playmobil wigs because I wanted to provoke, to arouse reactions by making the models unrecognizable and making people, the spectators, capable of imagining again, of playing. Each person could create his or her own fairytale and enter inside the story. The important thing is never to stop on the surface but to dive in depth.

PJL: Some magazines have described you as a poet of forms because through your creations you generate a moment in which reality is suspended. How would you define your creations?

JN: For me, it is fundamental to always remember the entertaining aspect of life, the ability to imagine and to dream. Creating the conditions by which also others are able to dream is very important to me. Dreams contain connections with reality. In dreams, everything is possible.

PJL: Your "A costura do Invisível" collection takes its inspiration from the 19th century: why?

JN: In the 19th century, everything was made by hand. Everything had a value and the emotion behind every single work made it precious and it was made to last in time. Today, a Fashion Show lasts 10 minutes, everything is fast and frenetic and it becomes really difficult to transmit a message in an organic way!

PJL: What is the relationship between architecture and fashion?

JN: Fashion is something you can see everywhere. The ancient word habit (another word for "dress") derives from Latin habitus, external aspect, from the verb habere, to possess, and we can synthesize the fashion world with this term. The word habit also means the practice of doing something every day. Instead, we can connect architecture with the word habitaculum, habitatio, a place where people live. This to show that fashion and architecture have very close ties, they are connected. If you enter into someone's apartment, it's like wearing his or her habit (dress). Both the dress and the apartment say a lot about each one of us, they are like a second skin.

Just like architecture and fashion both speak about our emotions. Fashion for me is like a screensaver, that is, my ability to create a relationship with society. I think that a good book, a photograph are meaningful not for their aesthetic aspect, but for their contents. A good book is good not while you are reading it, but for the contents it leaves you with. A good image is good because of the emotions that it transmits to you. What is inside the photograph is more important than its aesthetic aspect. Our mission must be to see beyond all this, for this reason "A costura do Invisível" synthesizes my philosophy of life and of conceiving art, i.e., not only the aesthetic value but the intrinsic value and the ethics of everything we do. •